

Testing understanding of the Personal Housing Action Plan cover letter: Results from an online trial

Executive Summary

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of people seeking social and affordable housing from their local authority.ⁱ Local authorities have a statutory duty to help house those with the highest housing needs (deemed ‘in priority need’), and prioritise this cohort when allocating social and affordable housing. However, this leaves a significant group of people who require help to secure a property in the private rental market.

In an effort to apply new and innovative approaches to housing, five District Councils in Kent, with funding from the Local Government Association (LGA), commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to apply behavioural insights to Kent’s housing allocation service.ⁱⁱ In anticipation of the significant changes that local authorities would face when the Homelessness Reduction Act came effect on April 3rd, 2018, BIT redesigned the cover letter that will be provided with each Personal Housing Action Plan (PHAP) in Kent. On the online Predictiv platform, BIT then tested the two versions of the cover letter to assess whether the behaviourally informed version improved understanding and resulted in more accurate expectations of social housing.

We found that people who saw the behaviourally informed letter were 43 percentage points more likely to understand the letter’s two key messages. They were also 12 percentage points more likely to understand that most people can find a place more quickly on the private market compared to waiting for a social home. And finally, as expected wait times increased people were more likely to say that applicants should seek private housing. Based on these results, the Districts should adopt an amended version of the behaviourally informed PHAP cover letter (a version of which is suggested in Annex D). BIT also suggests that the Districts **quickly** inform prospective applicants roughly how long they will have to wait given their level of need.

“Having the Behavioural Insights team take a fresh look at how we work with our customers and the messages we are currently giving to them about their housing options was really useful. For me, the project helped reinforce the importance of managing expectations of the people who come to us for help, whilst not putting off the people who are most in need. There are no easy solutions to managing demand for homelessness services, but I have learnt that behavioural insights can help support homelessness prevention work and contribute to improving the way we communicate with our customers on a daily basis.

It was also really useful to have the ongoing support of the LGA throughout the project, to help identify the intervention that would be most effective and also to keep in mind how the learning from this piece of work could be replicated by other local authorities.”

Jane Lang, Housing Services Manager, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

ⁱ See data at: <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/england-hssa-housing-strategy-statistical-appendix>

ⁱⁱ Local Government Association (2018). *Behavioural Insights*. Retrieved from: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/behavioural-insights>