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Cabinet Housing Panel
31 July 2023

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Monday 31 July 2023 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors G.Moore (Chairman)

M.Birleson (Vice-Chairman), J.Cragg, S.Goldwater,
T.Rowse, A.Scott, S.Tunstall, S.McNamara,
G.Michaelides and T.Kingsbury

ALSO Chris Andrews, Resident Panel
PRESENT:

OFFICIALS C Barnes, Executive Director (Place)
PRESENT: S.McDaid, Service Director (Resident & Neighbourhood)
D.Trewick, Housing Options Manager
E. Manzie, Service Manager, Property Manager
R. Misir, Governance Services Officer

8. SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitution of Panel Members was made in accordance with Council Procedure Rule:

Cllr Tony Kingsbury for Cllr Roger Trigg
Cllr Steven McNamara for Cllr Rebecca Lass
Cllr George Michaelides for Cllr Fiona Thomson.

9. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Rebecca Lass, Fiona Thomson, Roger Trigg and Jill Weston, and from Ardita McHugh, Residents Panel Representative.

10. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2023 (previously circulated) were approved as a correct record.

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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Councillors T. Kingsbury declared a non-pecuniary interest in items on the agenda as appropriate by virtue of being a Member of Hertfordshire County Council.

12. HOUSING OPTIONS REPORT

Members received a presentation from the Council's Housing Options Manager about the work of the Housing Options Team and the support provided for residents through temporary accommodation. The presentation is attached to these minutes.

Members commended the presentation. A number of points were raised and discussed:

- Members asked whether there was a joined-up approach when there were issues of dual diagnosis or other complexities. Officers responded that the data they could now obtain from systems was enabling them to link people's support needs. This could relate not just to mental health and drug dependency but also mental health and domestic abuse. The close working relationship with the County Council supported this.
- Members asked about Howlands House in respect of temporary housing. Officers said that when it was redeveloped it would be the largest accommodation site in terms of units but acknowledged it was an old building. It was important to have the right facilities for people who needed temporary accommodation and the new accommodation would help with that.
- Members noted the rising demand for temporary accommodation and asked what happened to the significant number of people who did not meet the criteria. Officers explained that usually about half the number of people approaching the Council in this regard were assessed as either homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Council needed to consider which of those were owed a duty to be provided with temporary accommodation and a lot of partnership work was focused on the people who were not owed this duty; specialist officers worked with single people so they could receive more targeted support, and an officer worked directly with Probation and the prison service. It could be difficult to find accommodation to move people into as while officers could identify the issues and cause of homelessness, what was needed were options for accommodation, which was where work with the private sector and other supported accommodation came in.
- A Member had noticed police speaking with rough sleepers in Welwyn Garden City and asked about work with police. Officers said they became aware of rough sleepers in various ways and were promoting referrals through the Street Link service as the data could then be used to target people more smartly. Officers worked with police and antisocial behaviour teams; patrols took place and staff had an understanding of who might need assistance. People might not necessarily want to accept help at first and repeat visits meant they became more familiar with the service which

built trust. There could also be a crossover with people begging or who appeared to be sleeping rough but were not.

- A Member reflected on how difficult it must be for officers to work in such difficult circumstances and how disappointing it was that Council accommodation was only available for the most vulnerable. Officers responded that although the work is difficult, staff wanted to support people and celebrated their successes. This was not the only route into Council housing given the allocations policy and work of the homeless team.
- A Member commented that pride should be taken in Inspira House as a resource for homeless people.
- A query was raised about whether people recovering from substance use who had been housed in Hatfield received onsite assistance and could support each other while they were there. Officers replied that the individuals got to know each other in the houses and had support workers. The Council was trying to move away from houses in multiple occupation (HMO) as it was not a long term solution; the idea behind Housing First was that accommodation was provided and then support was offered but it was important the individual could see their accommodation as their long term home which was hard if they were in an HMO.
- A Member commented that members of the armed forces had not been mentioned and asked if they received support, noting they could include young people who had served a few years and had post-traumatic stress disorder or families left without accommodation. He was aware that the rule that stipulated a prior association with the area was no longer in place. Officers said there was not a specialist officer for veterans as the numbers did not currently support it but the team had a good understanding of the Armed Forces Covenant and had met with an umbrella agency which supported veterans. In the event that a veteran was to present locally as homeless, officers could plug into different charities and an online database, and were confident any period of homelessness would be short.
- Officers advised Beam (a social enterprise) was crowdfunded. It treated each individual as a project, assessed what they needed to move into accommodation and employment (eg a deposit for the first month's rent or a laptop to apply for work) and people then donated to help people move on. The individuals were not identified on social media. Members asked for their thanks to be passed on to Beam.
- A Member noted the increase in market rents and that the local housing allowance for Universal Credit was frozen, and asked whether support was provided to help bridge that gap and if there was guidance on this. Officers confirmed this support was available for people the Council was trying to move into accommodation as landlords and letting agents would want to know they could afford the rent. If an individual could afford it with the assistance of local housing allowance with a top-up then it was a question of how sustainable that was as individuals' access to resources varied, so decisions were made on a case by case basis. Meeting each

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shortfall was not realistic and would undermine looking at the local housing allowance freeze. The team worked closely with Housing Benefits colleagues who had access to discretionary housing payments which would be prioritised; however this was usually awarded on a short term basis whereas Housing Options was looking towards long term sustainability. Personalised housing plans were a legal requirement. Finance was key in trying to sustain tenancies; there were tenants who landlords were happy with but who could have sizeable rent arrears, costs associated with finding new tenants, and some local letting agents had been helpful in identifying the costs in order for negotiations to take place.

- A Member asked about provision of support when tenants received a S21 notice as the Council might speak to the landlord to see if it could be rescinded; otherwise they would incur the landlord's court costs. Officers said help had been provided, usually with the intent of obtaining more time. Ultimately at this point the Council should be housing households which was not always possible but in some cases where the landlord had been flexible or there was no other way to rectify the situation officers had agreed to do so, and this was a more cost-effective measure than rehousing a household.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

Members noted the contents of the report.

13. VOIDS REPORT

Members received a presentation about the voids process from the Service Director (Resident and Neighbourhood). The presentation is attached to these minutes.

A number of points were raised and discussed:

- A Member asked how poor workmanship from contractors was dealt with. Officers explained they looked at the standards expected when a property was returned. Additionally, weekly contract meetings took place with the contractor to address any issues found during void inspections. The Council did not accept properties back until they meet the required standard. There were penalties for the contractor if they were late or workmanship was poor.
- A Member asked about the responsibilities of tenants to hand back properties in an appropriate condition, and whether taking sanctions could encourage them to be returned in a better state. Officers replied that they were looking at joint inspections; properties could be returned in a poor condition and then required major works. There had been a lack of planned works and an investment programme was taking place. It had not been possible to have pre-inspections during the pandemic which meant properties had been left in a poor condition and that seemed to have become the norm. Pre-inspections now would form the start of a new process and the neighbourhood officer and surveyor would inform the

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tenant of the state the property needed to be returned in, with tenants recharged for works if necessary. Members noted it would be useful next year to look at whether this work had resulted in reducing the costs of restoring voids.

- It was noted that voids performance for Q1 had decreased; a lot of work was being put into it and officers expected it to improve over the next few quarters.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

Members noted the contents of the report and the recommended management actions to improve the voids management process and performance.

14. COMPLIANCE REPORT

Officers advised the report followed on from the previous meeting and set out the compliance position. A Member reflected on how much progress had been made on this in the last two years and thanked the team for its work on compliance.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

Members noted the contents of the report.

15. PERFORMANCE REPORT QUARTER 1, 2023/24

The Executive Director (Place) advised the report provided a summary of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and invited comments. A summary of responses is set out below:

- A Member noted the target for BPI 126 (Housing Options applicants to receive an assessment within 14 days of being assigned to an officer) was not being met; the average time to assess cases was 12.4 days which raised concerns about some individuals having to wait significantly longer. Officers responded that this was a new KPI introduced this year to try and give a better picture of the work the team was doing and the target was not being exceeded by very much. Officers were considering the introduction of additional KPIs so that Members could be provided with detail about how long people were waiting. The main reasons for the target being missed were due to asking for additional financial information or carrying out affordability checks, and officers might need to take this into account when structuring the KPI in future.
- A Member noted figures were not available for the new KPIs as they were new targets. Officers confirmed this was the case as they were new measures for the current municipal year so they would be available in future; the Q1 performance would be reflected in Q2 so Members would see how this changed over time.

RESOLVED
(unanimous)

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Members noted the contents of the report.

16. WORK PROGRAMME

Members asked if a Morgan Sindall presentation could be on a future agenda. Officers advised that the Chief Executive was looking at the best way to make that happen.

Meeting ended at 8.54 pm

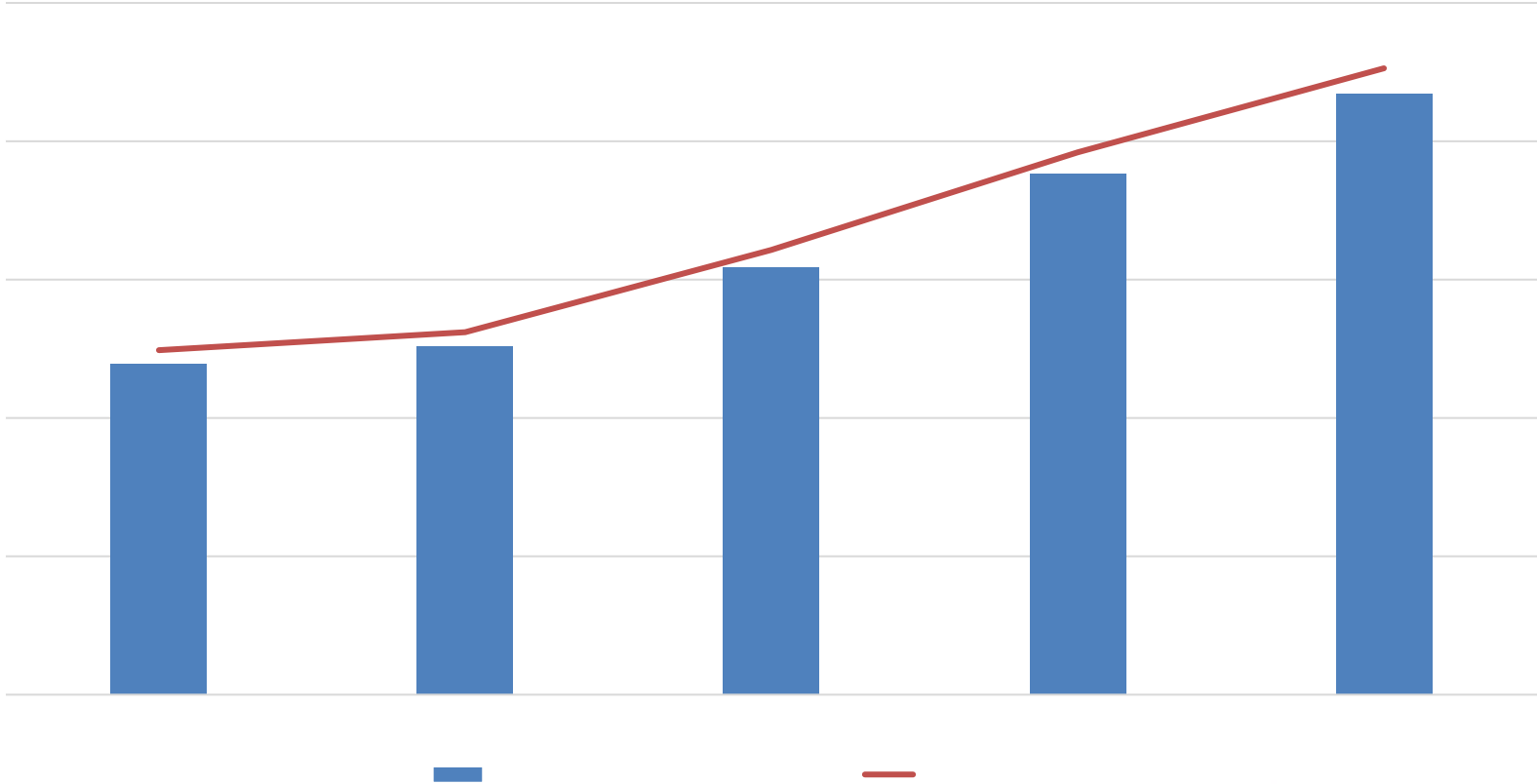




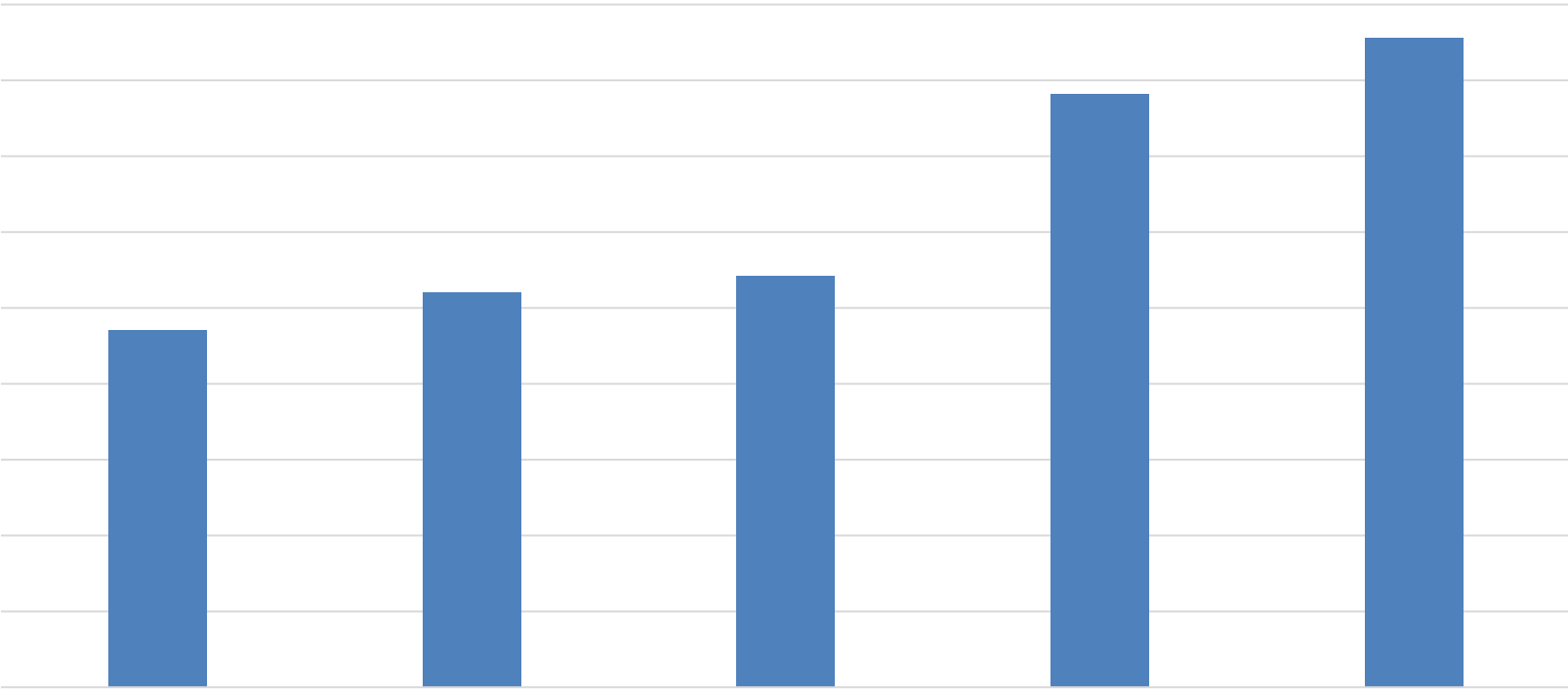












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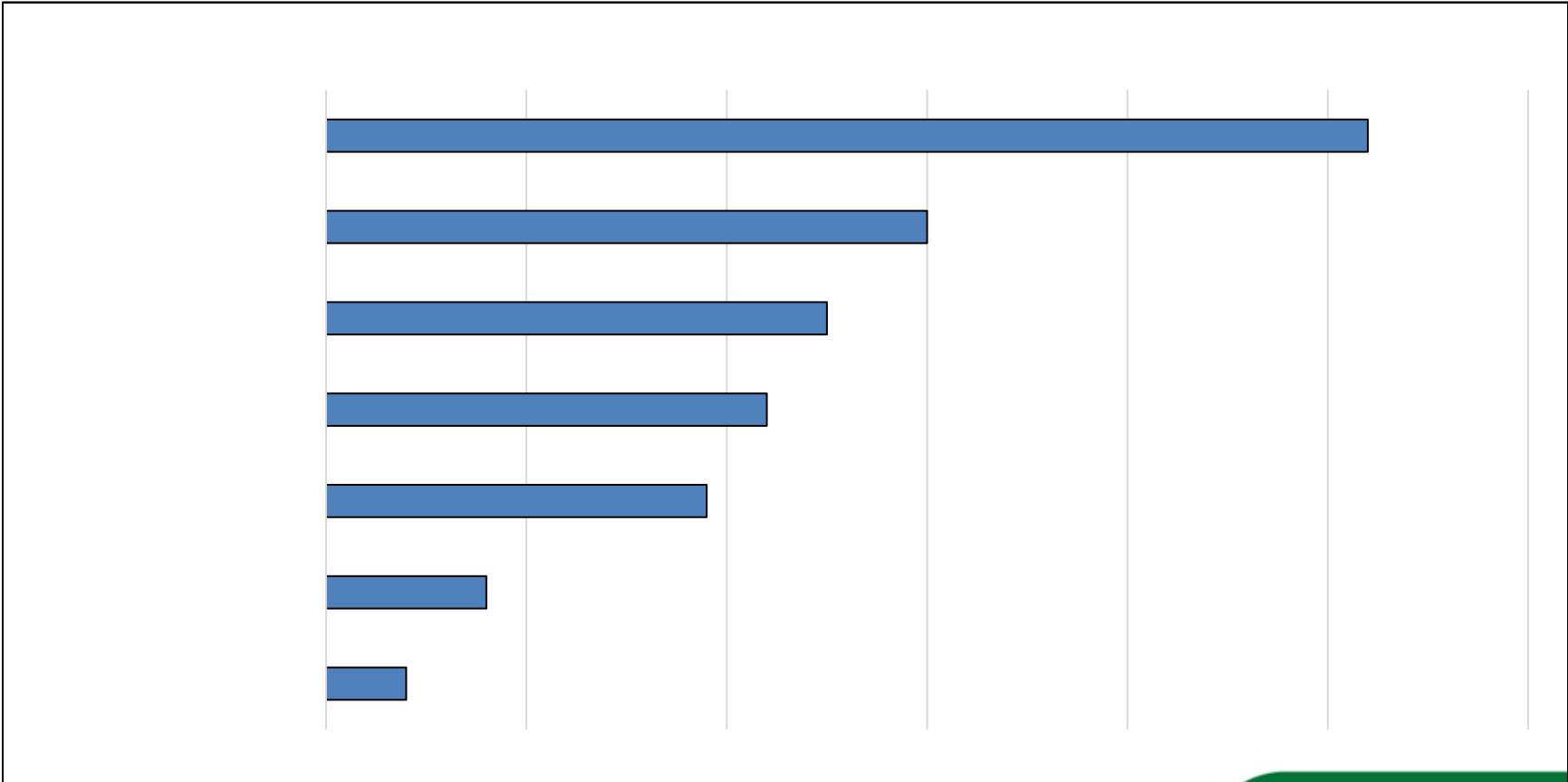




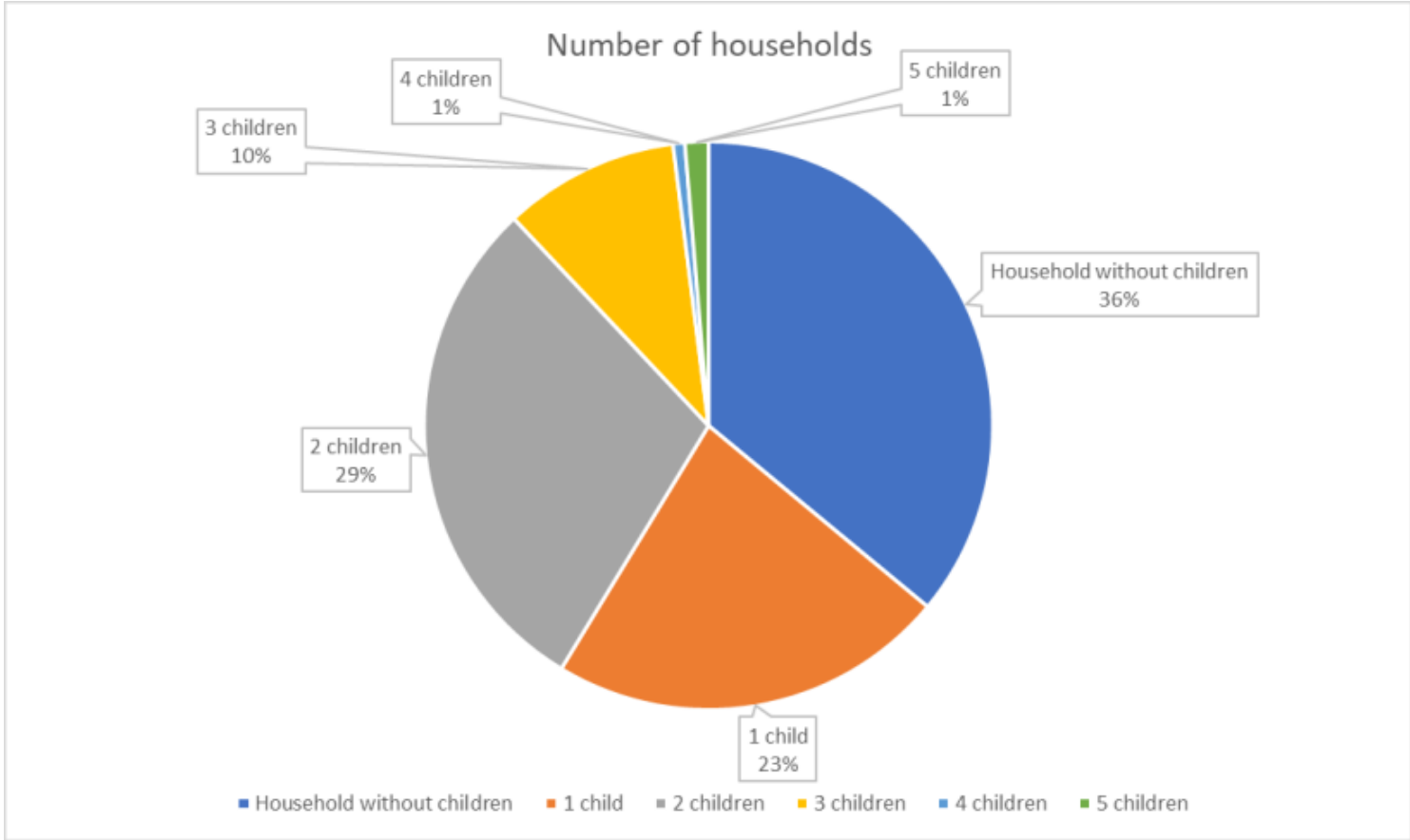




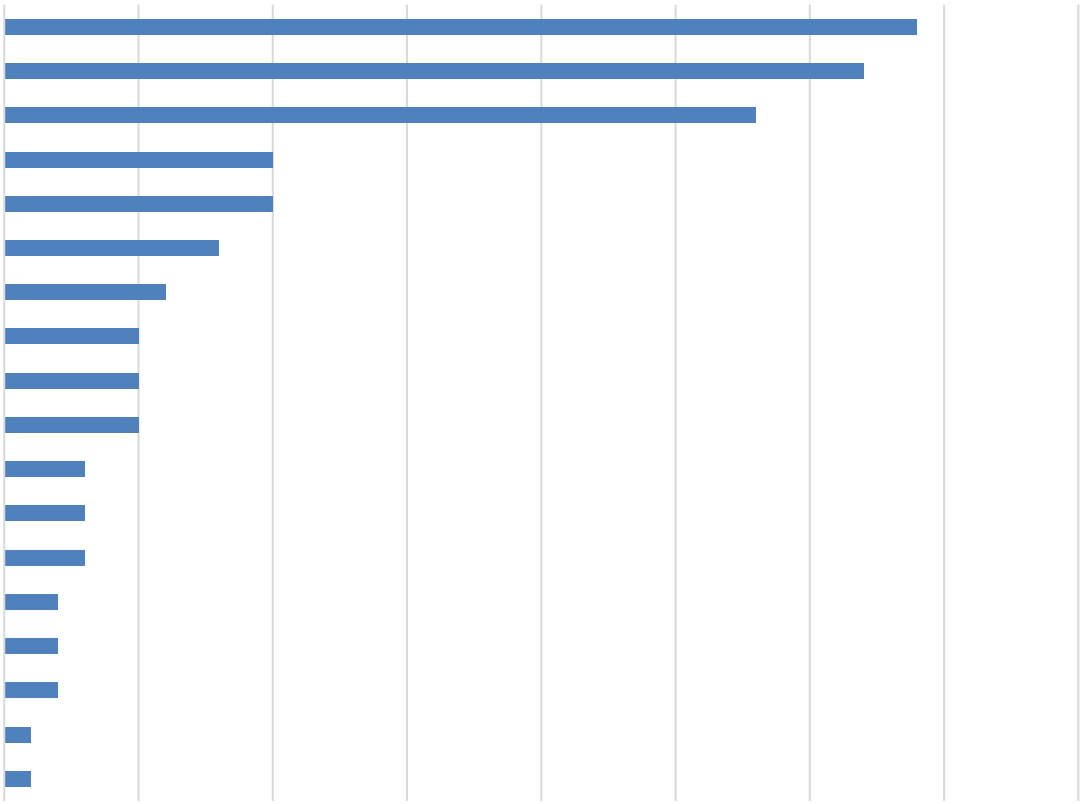


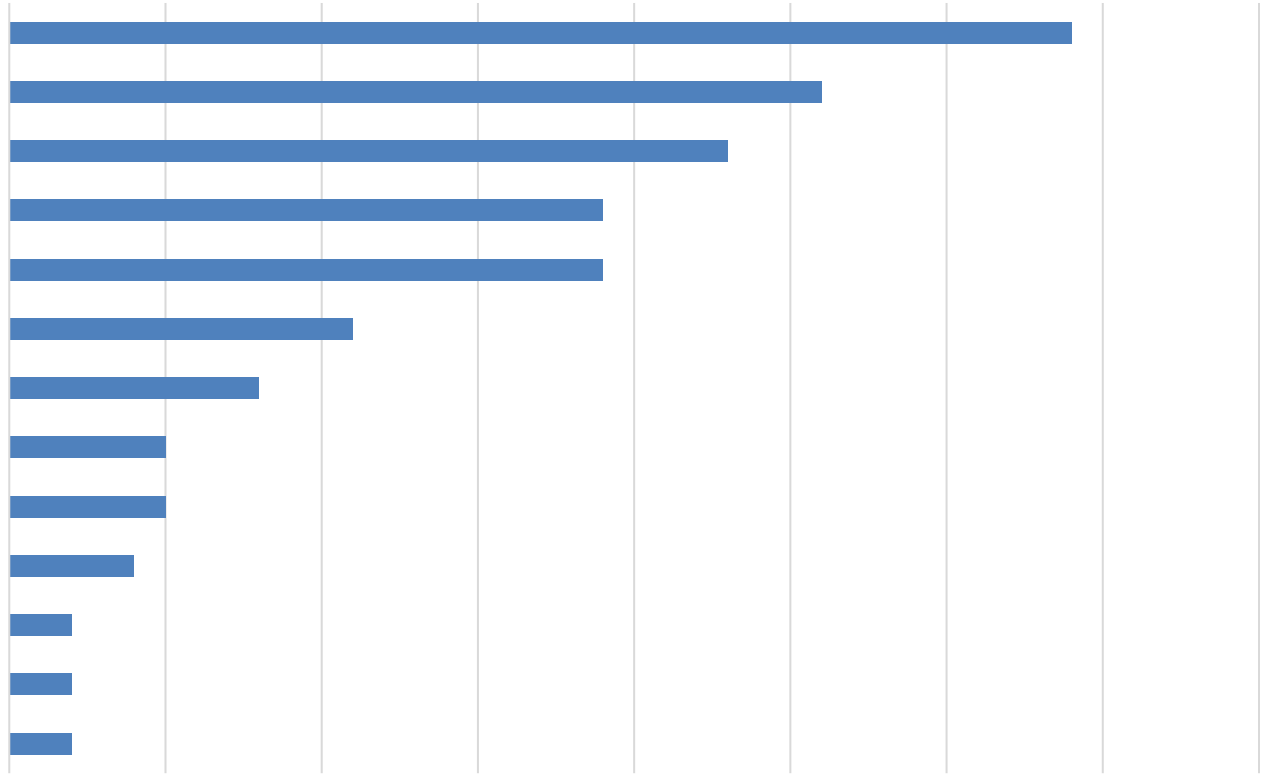
















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