

Title of Report:	Homelessness mystery shopper exercise
Report to be considered by:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Meeting:	26 February 2013

Purpose of Report: To present to the Commission the findings of and response to a mystery shopper exercise conducted by the charity Shelter.

Recommended Action: To consider the Shelter report and the response provided by the Housing Service and comment as they determine appropriate.

Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Chairman	
Name & Telephone No.:	Councillor Brian Bedwell – Tel (0118) 942 0196
E-mail Address:	bbedwell@westberks.gov.uk

Contact Officer Details	
Name:	David Lowe
Job Title:	Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager
Tel. No.:	01635 519817
E-mail Address:	dlowe@westberks.gov.uk

Executive Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In 2012 the charity Shelter was commissioned by the Council to carry out a telephone, email and face to face mystery shopping exercise to assess the standard with which the initial contact by people with a housing problem is handled.
- 1.2 This report sets out the response by the Housing Service to the recommendations of the report and provides the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC), which has previously requested sight of the document, with the opportunity for comment.
- 1.3 Shelter's full report is shown at Appendix A and the Housing Service's commentary on it is shown at Appendix B.

2. Exercise methodology

- 2.1 The exercise was carried out by the charity's Business Support Team, which:
 - Made a total of 20 telephone contacts, attempted during a period from mid July to mid August. A range of typical advice scenarios with varying levels of urgency were used. These were tailored with local information for authenticity.
 - Sent five emails, with a range of typical advice service problems.
 - Three face to face mystery shops were undertaken.
 - Conducted a review of the Housing/Housing options section of the West Berkshire Council Website. This review was conducted by a BST staff member who has experience in conducting reviews of local authority websites.
- 2.2 Each element of the exercise was assessed against objective criteria and ratings given for each.
- 2.3 The exercise took place at the time when the Housing Team had a relatively new team of Housing Options Officers. These officers had been in post for only two weeks and were in the process of receiving initial training in how to deal the range of issues clients presenting to the service.

3. Recommendations arising from Shelter's report

- 3.1 The charity's report made four recommendations which are shown below, along with the response from the Housing Service.

Recommendation 1	A standard approach be adopted to establish the basic details of the [homelessness] problem and providing some outline advice about the full range of options so that this is covered at the point of initial contact.
Response	The Housing Service introduced a prompt sheet in October, unaware of the Shelter report – this should resolve the issues about structure of initial contacts.

Staff who answer the phones and work on Pod [enquiry desk] attended Shelter's 'Foundation A' training in September. This has given them a more in-depth understanding of the housing issues that they might be confronted with

Recommendation 2

Use telephone and e-mail services as effective prevention opportunities.

Response

The Housing Service would welcome the opportunity to review the e-mails sent so that it can consider the improvements suggested in Shelter's report

Shelter do not offer suggestions on a better way of running the existing triage service within existing staff resources. The Housing Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss the opportunities to review the structure of operations with Shelter in more detail.

Recommendation 3

Introduce a proper appointment system whereby a client is informed of a date and time to attend the council offices or when they will be contacted by telephone without having to wait for a call back

Response

The Housing Service would need to review how the service is delivered and would welcome advice from Shelter on best practice. Housing Service standards could be developed to address this issue.

Recommendation 4

Improve information on web services and provide self-help tools

Response

As soon as resources allow, the Housing Service will review the web pages, in line with both Shelter's recommendations and corporate guidelines

Locata, the Council's housing software, does have a housing options module that could deliver on-line housing options advice to clients. There are also other software providers offering similar products. There would be a cost implication to introducing such a system but it could potentially reduce the number of people who go on to access face-to-face advice services.

3.2 In addition to Shelter's recommendations, the Housing Service has advised that it would welcome:

- An examination of the broader service using the Department of Communities and Local Government's Self Diagnostic Toolkit, to ensure that it is offering quality housing advice and achieving the right outcomes for clients.
- Input from Shelter on the best model for delivering services within existing resources.

- Exploration of the potential for Shelter to offer a housing advice surgery from within West Street House to complement the work undertaken by the Housing Options Officers.

3.3 Explanations and the rationale for each of the recommendations is shown at Appendix A.

3.4 Context and comment on Shelter's report is provided by the Housing Service at Appendix B.

4. Recommendations for Members of the OSMC

4.1 It is recommended that the Members of the Commission consider the Shelter report and the response provided by the Housing Service and comment as they determine appropriate.

Appendices

Appendix A Shelter report

Appendix B Housing Service response to the findings and recommendations of the Shelter report

Consultees

Local Stakeholders: None

Officers Consulted: June Graves

Trade Union: N/A