

Shelter

West Berks Housing Operations

August 2012

Final Report of Findings

Business Support Team

1. Introduction

Shelter's Business Support Team (BST)

Since 2001, Shelter has worked with over 70 local authorities throughout England on a range of consultancy exercises focussed on homelessness and housing advice service delivery.

We have considerable experience of undertaking quality audits, mystery shopping, service user feedback exercises and other quality assessments for local authorities, of both their own provision and that of contracted agencies such as RSLs and CABx.

We have also recently started to provide a comprehensive homelessness and housing advice review service with Acclaim Consulting, which combines Shelter's expertise in conducting quality reviews with Acclaim's expertise in cost and performance benchmarking to provide a review service focussed on establishing value for money.

Brief

Shelter's Business Support Team was asked by West Berkshire Council to carry out a telephone, email and face to face based mystery shopping exercise to assess the standard with which initial contact by people with a housing problem is handled.

The council expected the consultancy exercise to provide a robust, independent challenge to identify areas of strength and areas where improvements may be made.

This brief was limited to mystery shopping and therefore did not encompass an assessment of the full client journey of someone presenting with a housing problem at West Berkshire Housing Services. Assessments of housing options and homelessness files enable a comprehensive review of the standards applied in handling the customer enquiry from 'case open' through to 'case closure' and therefore provide a complete diagnosis of the advice provided and housing options discussed. As the brief unusually was undertaken without a service profile or discussion with the Housing Service Manager it has not been possible to contextualise the findings to reflect key factors that may have impacted on the handling of the initial contact (for example staff absences, staff capacity, training needs, new staff etc).

2. Method

Telephone/Email Based Mystery Shopping & Website review

A total of 20 telephone contacts were attempted during over 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.

Five emails were sent with a range of typical advice service problems. Three face to face mystery shops were undertaken.

A review was conducted of the Housing/Housing options section of the West Berkshire's Council Website. This review was conducted by a BST staff member who has experience in conducting reviews of local authority websites.

All calls and emails were made by either BST staff or Shelter Advice staff who have considerable experience in Mystery Shopping type exercises both internally to Shelter and externally to other Local authorities and external agencies.

Each Telephone mystery shopper was asked to call the West Berks Council telephone contact number or use the website email link and rate their experience on a five-point scale – see table below, against a number of assessment criteria that covered:

Telephone /Email

- Was it easy it was to get through on the telephone
- Was an email response received & how promptly
- How polite, friendly and helpful was the person who handled the call
- Whether sufficient time was given for the caller to explain why they were calling
- Whether the key points of the problem /situation/circumstances were established
- Whether an accurate and appropriate outline explanation of what the service might be able to do to help was given
- Whether the suggested next steps were timely, appropriate and clearly explained? (E.g. timescales/urgency/appointment/drop-in arrangements/paperwork to bring etc.)
- Was the email response written in clear, plain language?
- An overview of how well the call/email was handled from the customer perspective
- An overview of how well the call/email was handled from a business perspective

Website

- How accessible was the website?
- Would a user would find the website intuitive and make finding information and advice easy?
- Does the website provide access to accurate, useful and comprehensive information about housing options?
- Are there a range of useful self-help tools/packs available for download?
- Does the website have a comprehensive suite of relevant policy, performance and strategic documents?
- Are there links to other websites to help users access further information and advice and is there useful details of local/National contacts?
- Does it detail how to contact services & clearly set out what a customer can expect when making contact?
- Does the website have functionality to support on-line applications and self-management of updates?
- An overview of how useful & useable the website is from the customer perspective
- An overview of how well the website was efficiently and effectively engaging with its customers from the business perspective

Face to Face

- Were the environment and facilities at the council offices a welcoming and friendly atmosphere? Availability of private interview areas, comfortable waiting areas, useful display and customer information
- Easy to find where to go to make a housing query and seek advice
- What was the duration of waiting time to see someone at the initial point of contact?
- Able to discuss query in a private interview area
- Polite, friendly and helpful staff dealing with the query
- Given sufficient time to explain why visiting the council's offices
- Key points of the problem(s)/situation and circumstances established
- Given an accurate and appropriate outline explanation of what the service might be able to do to help
- Next steps timely and appropriate and clearly explained

Scoring

The scoring system used within the assessments are based on a 5 point scale (see table).

Rating	Points	Assessment
Excellent	4	The standard meets all designated requirements, and there is no or very little scope for improvement.
Good	3	The standard is high and meets most designated requirements, but there is still some scope for improvement.
Fair	2	The standard meets the minimum necessary designated requirements but no more; there is considerable scope for improvement.
Poor	1	The standard does not meet minimum designated requirements.
Failing	0	The standard does not meet any designated requirements, or the work is not done at all.

The 'Fair' level reflects the minimum threshold of acceptable work and is therefore a "pass."

3. Results

The full breakdown of the results and supporting comments are available by clicking on the following link to the Survey Monkey reports: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/WestBerksResults>

Password: West Berkshire 1

These reports are set to show all results however, the tool provides the facility to filter results, (e.g. particular question) and also to browse responses one by one. Some guidance on how to use the Survey Monkey tool is attached in the document Shelter Survey Monkey guide.

4. Summary of Findings:

The service is easy to access as demonstrated by the prompt answer of calls, emails and triage interviews. On the whole, staff members are friendly and polite.

However, the service operates a triage system which does not routinely enable customers to obtain advice on housing options easily at the first point of contact. Priority for advice and assistance is given to homelessness which is positive but this is narrowly defined to anyone who is homeless the same or next day and means that early prevention work is limited. Comments by mystery shoppers also indicate that customers felt less confident about the help they would receive given the lack of information gathered about their circumstances and the narrow range of options mentioned. As the mystery shopping exercise did not go beyond this first point of contact, Shelter was not able to experience the level of advice and support that clients would receive upon attending a diagnostic interview.

Some recommendations for improvement are listed in section 5 below.

Telephone Mystery Shopping

Making the call

An excellent score of 100% (all 20 calls) was achieved by the Housing Operations Team answering the phone on first attempt by the mystery shoppers. Housing officers tend to provide their names; where a caller spoke to reception first they were less likely to get a name.

40% of calls fell into the required call duration of 5 – 10minutes. However, 25% were less than 5minutes, which would indicate less effective handling of initial contact with little information gathering and or advice. 35% were over 10minutes, which would indicate unstructured approach to handling the initial contact in relation to information gathering and advice.

Ease of access to someone who could help with the housing query

Only 35% (7 out of the 20) of calls were rated as Good or Excellent for ease of access to someone who could provide help with the query. 40% (8 out of 20) of calls were rated as Fair and 5 calls were rated as Poor.

Some positive ratings related to scenarios where the callers presented with homelessness or threatened with homelessness and the caller was able to provide enough information about their situation. For example one scenario concerned a caller with a dependent child having fled her home due to violent parents, another about a single homeless person recovering from drug abuse. Some positive ratings were achieved where a housing options officer answered the phone rather than reception/non housing advice staff.

Poor ratings were given where shoppers were told that someone would call back with little information gathered about the caller's circumstances which indicates missed opportunities to provide timely and efficient advice.

A frequent comment was that the duty housing officer is not available or busy with an emergency. Shoppers also reported that priority of call tends to be assessed on the basis of 'Are you homeless tonight?'

One scenario where a shopper was told that someone would call back concerned a single female having fled domestic violence and experiencing mental distress. Another scenario concerned a single person with mobility difficulties and suffering depression had been asked to leave by a friend – the call back took place one day later at which point the officer asked for a few more details and informed the shopper they do not have a local connection and should make a homelessness application in the area they recently left. This example illustrates that the initial point of contact could have been more effective if the shopper had been referred to online information about different options including homelessness or could have been dealt within one call.

How polite friendly and helpful was the person who handled the call?

80% of ratings (15 out of 20 calls) were Good or Excellent with the remainder being Fair, which is a good result overall. "Polite, friendly and helpful" were frequent comments in a number of responses and some highlighted that the officers showed a genuine interest in wanting to help and understand the caller's circumstances.

Where there were less positive comments these indicated that the call handler or officer lacked interest, kept them on hold or simply said someone would need to call back.

Sufficient time was given for the caller to explain why they were calling

13 calls (65%) of ratings were either Good or Excellent, with the comments supporting the fact that sufficient time was allowed for explaining the situation.

Three calls were rated as Poor. These calls recorded that little information was obtained by the call handler and quickly were offered a call back, therefore missing an opportunity to properly identify the priority of the call, for example one scenario concerned a homeless 16year old after her parents asked her to leave due to relationship breakdown, another concerned a caller having fled their private rented property as a result of threats and harassment from their landlord.

Key points of the problem /situation/circumstances were established

It should be possible within a structured call, of 5 to 10 minutes duration, to obtain sufficient key details that will help establish the client's situation/circumstance. The results show inconsistency in collecting sufficiently detailed information: 10 calls were rated either Good or Excellent, with 4 rated as Fair and 5 achieving Poor or Failing.

This is largely due to the fact that there were a high number of call backs and appointments offered so only in about half the scenarios callers reported that an officer made sufficient enquiries to gather information. A common theme was that the officers do not follow a structured approach and would often ask further questions only when the shopper volunteered information. Therefore, it should be recognised that the 10 calls at Good/Excellent may to some degree have been achieved due to some prompting by the shoppers.

An accurate and appropriate outline explanation of what the service might be able to do to help was given

A significant proportion of scores for this aspect were Poor or Failing (11 calls) with 6 rated as Fair and comments reflect that this was due to the limited range of options outlined, even when shoppers managed to speak to a duty officer.

There was, however, no evidence to suggest officers are reluctant to discuss a homeless application in scenarios where this should have been considered. The general theme was that only one option would be discussed so even where a shopper was advised that a homelessness application might not be successful (i.e. no local connection), alternative options were not being recommended or were briefly mentioned.

The comments also reflect a lack of evidence that officers would provide proactive advice and assistance for example no suggestions were made by officers that 'we may be able to assist you with private rented; we may be able to negotiate with your Landlord'

Suggested next steps were timely, appropriate and clearly explained? (E.g. timescales/ urgency/ appointment/ drop-in arrangements/paperwork to bring etc)

Approx 14 calls were rated Fair or Poor with only 3 rating this section as Good.

Key points were:

- Next steps were largely that a duty officer will call back, yet a lack of clarity about when this would happen (ranged from 'later today to 'sometime next week').
- There was little consistency in the information provided to callers about the information they would need to provide (ID, address, medical information etc)
- Little or no information is provided about drop-in arrangements, other ways to access information, or what a caller should do if their circumstances change – again the emphasis is that the appointment/drop in service is only available if someone is in an emergency situation (i.e. homeless tonight).

An overview of how well the call was handled from the customer perspective

12 callers rated the overall handling of the call from a customer perspective as Poor. This is a high level of dissatisfaction and again reflects the comments made that the routine approach to call handling is to take very basic information to assess whether a client is homeless on the day/tomorrow, otherwise a shopper is left waiting for a call back.

Positive scores were allocated where a shopper received some basic advice, clear next steps and in some cases a call back within a day or two of first contact.

An overview of how well the call was handled from the business perspective

8 calls were rated as Fair, and 8 as Poor or Failing from a business perspective (how effectively and efficiently the calls were handled).

Key themes based on the findings are:

- Calls were not routinely handled as part of an efficient and effective customer service approach. Officers demonstrated inconsistent interview techniques in information gathering and ability to provide a concise outline of options and next steps. The approach was generally lacking good structure. Some mystery shoppers used the same scenario and found their call was handled differently.
- Calls can take over 10minutes and yet little or no advice or options are discussed indicating an inefficient use of time
- Using imminent homelessness to assess priority of cases and therefore entitlement to appropriate advice is a restrictive approach and presents a barrier to early intervention and advice in cases where clients are only likely to return because the situation has reached crisis.

Email Mystery Shopping

3 emails were rated as excellent in regards to the promptness of the replies (within 1 working day). 4 emails received were also rated as 'Good' or above for clarity and use of plain English.

However, of these responses only 1 was rated as Fair, with the remaining being rated as Poor with regards to receiving an accurate and appropriate outline explanation of the help that might be available. The main concern, again, was the lack of details within the email response, as is noted in this comment:

"No details about what the service might be able to do help. Has said that can she can look into the matter further and asks for additional information including the details of the Landlord and contact number for the Landlord - but given I have no explanation about what can be done to help I would be reluctant to provide details of the LL"

With regards to whether next steps were explained all email (100%) were rated as Poor. This is a consistent score that shows significant improvement is needed in the handling of enquiries by email. Lack of details about self help resources or contact details for other agencies (CAB, JobCentre/Benefits), no links to the housing register online, all impacted on the scores. No information was provided about the Housing Operation Team's own service for example drop-in, telephone advice, opening or closing times etc.

In respect of how well the email was handled from a client's perspective, 3 emails were rated as Fair and this was largely due to the promptness of a reply.

An area for improvement is that each email presented an opportunity to provide some advice - even if only in outline or reference to leaflets, online guidance etc – but this was not really taken as such by the service. Even where a shopper was asked to contact the service no or little explanation was given as to what the service could do to help.

Poor ratings reflect that opportunities were missed to give some basic housing options information and as such it was not an efficient nor effective service as clients would have to either re-contact by other means, e.g. drop in,

appointment, or go away with little knowledge of what the council may be able to do to help, or what other services are available to them.

There were also no links within email responses to sections of West Berkshire's own website. This is a waste of a good resource as there is some basic information about homelessness and housing options and links to other organisations that may be able to help.

Website Review

Overall 90% of ratings were Excellent, Good or Fair which indicates that this is a good website that engages well with its users.

Key positive features were:

- Excellent accessibility with a variety of features built in to assist this
- There were good navigation aids, e.g. search/skip options on the site and it was easy to navigate specifically to the housing option pages from the home page.
- The level of detail within the housing options section was reasonable but perhaps lacking in detail.
- The housing pages are enhanced by having additional links to other external agencies such as night shelters/ hostels, Connexions, Shelter.
- Some downloads are available for leaflets and forms throughout various pages. There were some options to self help with features like applying for the housing register online.
- Some local /national contact numbers were available throughout the site.
- There is a 'contact us' on the home page which remains through any page you visit. It was extremely easy to contact the council by email.

Key points to consider on the Poor ratings and some further suggestions for improvements:

- Consider having a housing page with menus within the page rather than having the housing pages split into different sections.
- To have a central area where all websites/downloads listed through the different pages could be found in one place.
- To have a central directory of useful local/national contact numbers.
- More prominence on applying to the housing register.
- Service standards for the housing department are not available on the website and there is no information on how well the department has performed against these standards with the addition of several customer survey reports.
- The Contact page does not list opening or closing time and does not explain that the service operates a triage/appointment system.
- To extend the use of A-Z within each section, e.g. by introduction of A-Z searches for the housing section.

Face to Face

All three face to face shops rated the environment and facilities at the council offices as Poor – this was specifically in relation to the West House office. Postitive comments indicate that there was a comfortable waiting area but no useful display and customer information and there was no availability of private interview areas.

All three shoppers reported that it was not easy to find where to go to make a housing query and seek advice – there is no public information (at council offices or on the website) that a person seeking housing advice must go to West House. There is no signposting in the area directing a person towards West House and at West House itself, again there is no visible sign that a person can seek housing advice.

In relation to the duration of waiting time, one shopper positively reported that they were seen within 5minutes. Two shoppers reported having to wait longer and in once case 30minutes.

The interview area is publicly located by the entrance door at West House and next to the reception desk with only a mini screen. All shoppers reported that the reception area was busy with people and others were able to hear their conversation as they disclosed personal information. This was particularly a negative experience for one shopper who presented with a domestic violence scenario and was having to discuss the breakdown of her relationship and partner's abusive behaviour. The officer was apologetic and tried to speak more quietly but still it was not an appropriate environment to discuss a domestic violence case.

Only one shopper reported that the staff member dealing with the query whilst not impolite or unfriendly seemed disinterested and confusing in the help offered.

A Fair rating was given by the three shoppers for sufficient time to explain why they were visiting the council's offices and reported that they did not feel rushed. Nevertheless the officers lacked a structured approach and shoppers were not clear about how much information was relevant. This clearly impacted on the scores for the next section relating to whether 'key points of the problem/situation and circumstances had been established'. Two shoppers rated this as Poor because the officer dealing with the query missed key information.

Within the assessment section on whether the shoppers were given an accurate and appropriate outline explanation of what the service might be able to do to help, two shoppers rated this as poor as they experienced contradictory information or a lack of information as well as uncertainty about when someone would contact them about an appointment. It is unclear why officers are not able to provide details of an appointment whilst the customer is present.

Each shopper reported a different rating for whether next steps were timely and appropriate and explained. This indicates an inconsistency in the approach of the officers and it is clear from the comments that the positive score was based on the shopper asking for clarity.

From a client's perspective it seems the face to face experience is not that different to a telephone query and could be more frustrating for a genuine customer who makes an effort to visit the Council to be informed that someone will contact them to arrange an appointment.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

West Berkshire Council's housing operations team - whether contacted by phone, email, or face to face – generally handle calls with a triage approach which can lead to a reasonable assessment of needs at the initial point of contact.

There are some positives to be taken from the exercise which is reflected in the range of Good and Excellent ratings through some of the assessments. In conclusion our findings are that:

- Most staff were courteous and engaged well with callers by introducing themselves and comments such as polite, friendly and helpful were terms frequently used.
- Mostly clients were allowed to explain their situation followed by some basic details being collected
- The service does not appear to be reluctant to discuss or mention homelessness where facts of the housing situation are established and show that this would be an option. However, a range of options (homelessness application being one) are not routinely discussed and there were some scenarios had the officer established the facts that homelessness application should have been outlined. A review of a selection of housing options files would provide further insight as to whether homelessness is routinely explained as an option or only in select cases.

However, there is also scope for improvement as indicated by the high level of Poor and Failing ratings:

- There could be more consistency and time spent on collecting crucial details to establish a client's situation on first contact. The service may want to consider introducing a triage /prompt sheet supported by training in effective handling of initial contact.
- A triage or diagnostic process should enable the service to effectively assess priority, level of need and allocate resource. From the results and findings of the mystery shopping it is recommended that further work is needed to improve the triage and diagnostic process to ensure advisers are better able to manage throughput.
- Offering advice and assistance without delay only to those clients that are imminently homeless is a restrictive approach and means that opportunities for early prevention work are being missed.
- An outline of options and providing self help resources at the earliest opportunity would be a more effective way of handling initial contact so that clients can access information and advice more efficiently and effectively rather than having to wait for call backs one to two weeks later (would also enable better utilisation of staff time). This in turn may help the service manage the demand for advice and assistance if customers are empowered with information and enables them to take proactive steps before their circumstances reach crisis point.
- Private interview rooms are made available for sensitive cases.
- Improvements to housing options and steps that customers could take to help their situation on the website would make it a more effective tool.

We therefore recommend that:

- A standard approach be adopted to establishing the basic details of the problem and providing some outline advice about the full range of options so that this is covered at the point of initial contact.
- Use telephone and email services as effective prevention opportunities.
- 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.
- Improve information on web services and provide self-help tools.