

Shelter Report – West Berks Housing Operations, August 2012

Housing Service Response – 14th December 2012

The Housing Service welcomes the opportunity to be audited by a credible external body and view this as an opportunity to improve the service that is offered, in a positive and proactive way.

Process

The Housing Service was unaware of the exercise and there were no prior discussions with the Housing Service to set context and provide details on how the Service operated or the current staffing situation.

Staffing

At the time the mystery shopping was undertaken the Housing Team had a relatively new team of Housing Options Officers. These officers had been with the team for a couple of weeks and received initial training but were undertaking telephone work to try and get them used to answering calls, understanding the range of issues that clients phoned in with and taking information from clients to inform the advice that would then be offered. This is a necessary step in the training process. Of the 20 mystery telephone calls that were taken, 9 have been identified as being taken by staff in training and a further 4 have not identified the officer, but it is likely, given the dates, that these were the new staff. This is of particular importance when considering comments on the structure of information-taking and the way in which the phone call was dealt with.

At the time of the mystery shopping, the Housing Options Officers were carrying case loads of between 80 to 100 active cases each. This is significantly higher than the recommended case loads of 25 to 30 cases. In addition, July and August are holiday periods where there are inevitably fewer staff available to meet customer demands.

Telephone Mystery Shopping

Making the Call

The Housing Service is pleased to find that callers find it easy to make contact with staff and that 100% of phone calls were answered on the first attempt by the mystery shoppers. This is achieved by having a fixed bank of six desks, with calls answered by two Housing Options Officers and both administration and Housing Register staff. This is pertinent to note in light of subsequent findings of the survey, as only the Housing Options Officers would be able to offer housing advice to a client who was phoning in, hence the triage system that is in place.

Shelter have suggested that initial contacts are unstructured with little information gathering or advice offered. As identified, most staff who are available to take phone calls are not trained to offer housing advice. They take very basic details which are referred to qualified Housing Options Officers who then carry out a diagnostic interview (either face to face or by telephone).

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

Overall, 75% of the calls were taken by someone who could provide help with the query. Given that only one third of the staff handling telephone calls are trained to offer advice, this is a positive outcome.

Shelter have suggested that taking basic information and asking a Housing Options Officer to call back results in missed opportunities to provide timely and efficient advice. No evidence to support this claim is provided, and reviewing the cases, it is evident that Housing Options Officers have taken time to follow up on cases etc. although this information would not be known to the mystery shopping staff.

Shelter also comment that the Duty Officer was “not available or busy with an emergency”. Part of the role of the Duty Officer is to see clients who present as homeless tonight. Ensuring that they receive assessment, advice and potentially an offer of accommodation that day will always be a priority for the Duty Officer. Both assessment and sourcing accommodation can be a timely exercise.

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

The Housing Service is extremely pleased to see that staff were rated as “polite, friendly and helpful” and are thus a welcoming service.

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

The Housing Service is extremely pleased that Shelter found that clients are allowed sufficient time to explain their situation. This demonstrates that, despite significant case loads and pressures on their time, staff take time to listen to what the client is saying and to ensure that they do not feel rushed, particularly given the difficult and traumatic circumstances they often find themselves in.

Key points of the problem/situation/circumstances were established

Overall, the Housing Service was found to obtain sufficient key details about the clients situation. Noting the comment made above, two-thirds of staff answering calls are not trained to offer advice and whilst taking on board the client’s perspective, it is better for the Housing Options Officer to take the detailed information from clients to inform their assessment. This also prevents clients from having to repeat their circumstances which may be quite traumatic.

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

Shelter found that an accurate and appropriate outline explanation was only offered in about half of the cases. In particular, they note that only one option would be discussed or suggestions about negotiating with landlords or assisting with private rented accommodation were not made. Having reviewed the case summaries in detail, the Housing Service has found examples that provide detailed housing advice and offer the options that Shelter suggest were not offered.

In particular, it would be for the Housing Options Officer to offer tailored advice and the cases were not carried through to the stage at which such advice would be offered, Given the way on which the Housing Service is structured and the range of staff who answer phones, the Housing Service would not expect such options advice to be offered on initial contact. Indeed, as the staff are not trained to do this, there is a risk that they would receive incorrect advice. It would have been beneficial for Shelter to have had the context of the Service prior to mystery shopping to inform them of the structure.

Suggested next steps were timely, appropriate and clearly explained

Shelter have presented this section as though it were failing, However, 'fair' is presented as being the pass mark but has been linked with 'poor'.

The Housing Service would agree that timescales for call backs are not always clear. This is partly because it depends on a particular officer's caseload and organisation and therefore other staff are reluctant to commit to a timescale that they have no control over.

Staff do not, on the whole, advise clients of information they may need to provide. This approach has been used in the past but the majority of clients would still not bring the information with them to their housing options interview. The Housing Service therefore finds it more effective to discuss what needs to be provided during the interview and then follow this up after the interview.

There is no 'drop-in' service for housing advice. The Housing Service have a reception desk (the Pod) open between 10-2 every day, however, this is really for CHR queries e.g. handing in ID, assistance with bidding etc. The exception to this is for households who are homeless tonight, who will always be seen by the Duty Officer on the day.

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

This is a subjective rating and Shelter's findings appear to be based less on how the call was handled and more on the advice offered. For example, in one of the cases, the caller was given detailed advice on his housing options but rated the call handling poor as he did not feel the options available were feasible for him. However, in practice, they were the only options available to him and the Housing Options Officer could not have offered him any more. This reflects the situation that clients perception of the Service is often influenced by whether they receive the answers they want to hear.

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

Again, this is a reflection of Shelter's view of the triage system that is in place. The Housing Service has tried different models of working within the resources available to them and is keen to make improvements where possible. The purpose of the triage system is to prioritise calls based on the urgency of the caller's situation. It is disappointing that the report has not

made any suggestions on how initial contact could be better provided within the resources available.

E-mail Mystery Shopping

The Housing Service have not seen the e-mails that were sent so is not able to comment on the way in which they were responded to or the comments made by Shelter.

Whilst Shelter is quite critical, the Housing Service would need to see the e-mails to assess whether the response was reasonable given the level of information required. It can be quite timely to draft an e-mail offering advice and signposting to leaflets/services if only limited information is provided and could miss an important prevention opportunity.

Website Review

The Housing Service is pleased that, overall, the website is good and engages well with its users.

When the Housing Service has the resources to do so, it will consider the suggestions for improvement, however, it should be noted that the Housing Service operates within a corporate template for the web pages and as such, some of the suggestions may not be feasible.

Face-to-Face

The Housing Service would agree that the environment and facilities for housing clients at West Street House are poor for the following reasons:

- The external signage is not clear that Housing are based in West Street House – signage is not the responsibility of the Housing Service and is a corporate issue
- The Pod is exposed to other customers who are standing at reception and who can over-hear– the Housing Service have been trying to address this through Property Services for over a year but the space is constrained and the opportunities for redesign are limited
- The display boards in Reception are dominated by Childrens Services and there is no clear allocation of space for Housing Services

Private interview facilities are available and are used as appropriate, If a client asks to be seen in a private interview, regardless of the query, their request is accommodated. All housing options interviews are conducted in private interview facilities.

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Each Housing Options Officer manages their own diary and arranges their own appointments, This allows them to manage workloads in an appropriate way and ensure that they see clients at a time and place convenient to them, hence why appointments are not offered by other staff at the Pod.

Comment

The mystery shopping was essentially a customer service exercise and it is evident that staff are friendly and welcoming and that clients are easily able to access the service. It is not possible from the exercise to assess the quality or appropriateness of housing advice and options offered.

As the exercise was carried out without the knowledge of the Housing Service, it has, in retrospect, created some operational issues that could have been avoided had there been a designated contact for Shelter within the Housing Service. In particular, this included a scenario involving a 16 year old girl. When the Housing Options Officer contacted the 'aunt' back, she felt the aunt's response on the girl's resolution to her housing situation was 'evasive'. Consequently, a referral was made to Childrens Services and both the Housing Service and Childrens Services were involved in work to try and identify the child and confirm her whereabouts. The Housing Service has also identified that as real addresses were used, letters have subsequently been sent out to try and follow up on clients and then received by the actual occupiers of the home who have not contacted the Service in any way..