



SHELTER MYSTERY SHOPPING EXERCISE

PROGRESS REPORT: A YEAR ON

The Devon Strategic Housing Group commissioned Shelter to mystery shop their housing advice and homelessness services in Autumn 2005.

The exercise tested access to services via the telephone, the quality of telephone advice, quality of recording telephone advice and a random file audit.

Individual reports were distributed to each Local Authority at the beginning of 2006. It is expected that each LA will work towards the recommendations set out in their report and monitor improvements as a result of any changes they may have made.

Devon wide results and recommendations were also presented, in March 2006.

This report used a survey to collect information about how each LA has changed and improved their services as a result of these Devon wide recommendations.

The key Devon wide findings and recommendations included:

AREA OF WORK	FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATION
Information gathering over the telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rarely took the opportunity to establish advice requirements, or deal with calls in any detail; Usually failed to establish basic details/analyse problems fully . 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the Shelter Telephone Advice recording sheet as a prompt in order that the right information is collected during an inquiry.
Advice quality over the telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General poor level of accuracy and precision in advice given; Advice was rarely comprehensive in covering options; Advice generally unlikely to be effective in tackling problems; Advice about Parts VI & VII generally poor, particularly showing a lack of awareness of when s.184 duty kicks in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential restructure within the department to ensure that the right people are answering the phone and giving advice; Training and guidance in prevention and options; Training in legislation; Establish a clear route through from telephone advice to assessment.
File Audit	<p>Can improve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record keeping of cause, enquiries made and progress of the investigation; Consideration of advice/support needs; Communication with applicants; Case planning to focus enquiries and promote efficiencies; The advice and support for people receiving negative decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use decision sheet and sign off for top of the file; Provide client with a summary of the advice given (Shelter form available on request); Improve clarity of letters, give reasons for decisions and explain the next steps; Regular file reviews; Improve records of how section 193 met.
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some authorities have developed systems and specific teams/posts for housing advice, options and prevention, however this is no guarantee to quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to address record-keeping re prevention cases, file management and quality assurance Clarify where housing advice sits within services and ensure all workers aware of what the roles are and how they interact Need to address training needs to develop better all round knowledge and awareness of housing, landlord & tenant and homelessness legislation



The following sections of this report detail the changes and improvements that the Local Authorities in Devon have made to their housing advice and homelessness services as a result of the Mystery Shopping Exercise.

TELEPHONE ADVICE

There have been some real changes to the way Local Authorities deal with telephone enquiries. 6 out of the 8 LA's completing the Mystery Shopping Exercise have started using a prompt sheet when officers are gathering information about a client's situation, this ensures that the right questions are asked and the right information is gathered. One local authority uses an advice prompt sheet in conjunction with local external advice agencies, not only does this improve consistency within the local authority but also in the advice given out in the community.

In addition 5 out of the 8 participating LA's have carried some form of restructure of their department to improve access to and quality of telephone advice. For example some of the LA's have set up a telephone rota system to ensure that callers are always put through to someone who has the right level of training for giving housing advice over the telephone.

There has also been improvement in the way that callers are able to progress through the system where officers feel the case needs further work at an interview or appointment. 7 of the 8 LA's have made the process clearer within their organisations by ensuring that officers have access to each other's diaries, and one LA has developed a flow chart to describe the process. 2 LA's have developed more outreach opportunities to ensure that appointments and interviews are easily accessible and do not rely on attendance at council offices.

TRAINING

One of the key recommendations was to improve the level of training of staff, both in prevention and in the homelessness legislation. All the LA's have provided some form of training to their staff ranging from Shelter training, DCLG training sessions, CIH, and independent training sessions.

FILE AUDIT

5 of the 8 participating LA's have improved their file organisation in some way. The changes ranged from altering the way that files were organised and ensuring consistency across officers, to making sure that a summary sheet is included at the top of each file with key information.

Out of the 8 participating LA's 6 have carried out a file review. Some have made file reviews integral to the working of the department e.g. one LA carries out a file review at every sign off, one LA has made it part of regular supervision, and one LA carries out file reviews at 6 weekly intervals.



COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENT

6 of the 8 participating LA's have in some way improved the way that they communicate with the client to ensure that they fully understand their situation and can refer back to the advice given. Most LA's have introduced a summary sheet of advice given that the client is able to take away. A couple of LA's have introduced slightly different measures to improve the situation e.g. one LA has introduced carbon copy interview forms so that the client can immediately take away the content of the interview with them for their records, the LA also ensures that the client signs the form and agrees the content as a true record of the interview. As well as ensuring that clients go away with a contact sheet after attending an interview another LA is keen to ensure that clients are given a written summary of any telephone advice given, this is done by letter after the telephone interaction.

3 LA's have also reviewed their decision letters to ensure they are legally correct, clear and understandable.

PREVENTION

All of the LA's taking part in the mystery shopping exercise have done some work to ensure that the housing advice and homelessness teams across Devon understand the interaction between homelessness prevention and the LA's statutory duty under the homelessness legislation. There is a mix of generic teams where officers carry out both prevention and homelessness investigations (3), and teams where some officers do prevention and other officers carry out the homelessness function (5). One LA has rewritten officer's job descriptions to clarify the functions of each role, another has made sure that other departments, who have a role in homelessness prevention e.g. antisocial behaviour teams and estate officers, are aware of homelessness prevention initiatives. Training is a key part of the way in which LA's have ensured that staff understand the interaction between homelessness prevention and the legislation.

Another positive issue with regard to prevention is that as well as improving the homelessness file, 7 LA's have also been working on and improving the way the homelessness prevention work is recorded and organised into files.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the 2005 Shelter mystery shopping exercise participating LA's were made aware of how their services could be improved. All have, in some way, addressed the Devon wide recommendations presented by Shelter in March 2006.