

Response (of the CAB) to the Report of the Housing Advice Task Group

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the report. From reading the report it appears to be based on the information provided in the review of the housing advice contract carried out in 2006. We would like to respond to the following points:

1. **Paying Twice** – the Service Level Agreement (SLA) section (3) pays for general advice which does include negotiating with 3rd parties but does not include casework. (see attached page for extract from SLA). The work we did under the housing advice contract was casework. Casework is defined in the SLA as :*“Taking action on behalf of the client, with the bureau taking responsibility for the conduct of the case. This may include negotiation and representation on the client’s behalf to third parties on the telephone, by letter, or face to face, including at appeal proceedings where necessary. The bureau drives and manages the case, generally devolving responsibility for this to a caseworkers) who will have a continuing relationship with the client.”* The housing contract was a casework based service and took internal referrals from all our offices, from NWDC and other organisations and agencies in the district.
2. **Changing Requirements** – North Wilts CAB disagreed with the Reviews findings that *‘the the arrangements lacked a focus on prevention, were limiting to reacting to homelessness and providing a rights based service’*. An understanding of the service we provided was not reflected in the review.

The service provided by the CAB was proactive and 95% of our work was homelessness prevention. During the contract we challenged less than 5 homelessness decisions per year and this took less than 5% of our time. We reduced the threat of homelessness by providing casework support to reduce rent and mortgage arrears and maximize income. We were able to encourage people to seek early housing advice before legal proceedings had been issued by the landlord or secured lender because our general advisers and benefits specialists identified there was a potential threat of homelessness when people used our service because of other problems.

During the period of the contract we did not have funds allocated to us to set up a rent deposit scheme. The scheme as it existed then was rarely used because it was a bond scheme that few landlords would accept. We are pleased that the Council has changed the scheme since October 2006 and that it now provides a practical solution to prevent homelessness.

3. **To assess the impact on users of the service** – We are very committed to the Councils aims to prevent homelessness and hold regular liaison meetings with the homelessness department to ensure we continue to work together to help meet these objectives. The bureau has managed to secure funding from the Legal Services Commission to provide specialist legal housing advice and is able to provide a casework service to people on a low income. In the first 6 months of this year we prevented homelessness for 62 families through this service. We would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership on this.

Recommendations to the new Wiltshire Council - Before the Council make recommendations to the new Wiltshire Council we wonder whether the Council might

consider other options and we refer you to the CLGs 'Best practice guide on homelessness prevention'.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/150973>. It states that the monitoring of housing advice activity to prevent homelessness should measure:

- the numbers of interventions (caseload volume)
- the housing circumstances of clients assisted (e.g. existing tenure, imminence of homelessness)
- the nature of interventions (e.g. advice only as opposed to advocacy)
- the immediate outcome of the intervention – robust outcome measurement is crucial.

It also gives examples of potentially relevant advice service performance targets:

- the number of households assisted to secure an extension of a private tenancy
- the numbers helped to access tenancies
- the gross amounts of unclaimed benefits identified and recovered.

The guide also discusses procurement and the advantages and disadvantages of in-house services and independent housing advice services.

We look forward to continue joint working on housing and homelessness prevention.

Sandi Sorell
19 October 2007

3. SERVICES WHICH WILL BE PROVIDED

The service offered by the bureau shall be 'assisted information' and 'general help'

Assisted information is a service in which staff are available to help clients to access information, and to identify where a client needs further information or advice.

General help is:

- Diagnosing the client's problems
- Giving information and explaining options
- Identifying further action the client can take and
- Giving basic assistance e.g. filling in forms, helping the client draft letters, and contacting third parties to seek information on the client's behalf.

Where necessary for a particular client, the core service provided by the bureau will also include contacting a third party to negotiate on the client's behalf. The client will retain responsibility for the case.

In accordance with the Citizens Advice membership the subjects covered will include:

- Consumer
- Money advice
- Welfare Benefits
- Employment
- Housing
- Family and personal matters
- Taxes
- Immigration and nationality
- Health
- Education
- Discrimination related to any of the above.

The service will not include casework unless resources are provided to cover this. Casework is defined as:

"Taking action on behalf of the client, with the bureau taking responsibility for the conduct of the case. This may include negotiation and representation on the client's behalf to third parties on the telephone, by letter, or face to face, including at appeal proceedings where necessary. The bureau drives and manages the case, generally devolving responsibility for this to a caseworker(s) who will have a continuing relationship with the client."

Extract from SLA between NWDC and North Wilts CAB