

**REPORT OF THE HOUSING ADVICE TASK  
GROUP TO THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE**

Report No.12

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	<b>18<sup>th</sup> October 2007</b>
<b>Title of Report</b>	<b>Report of the Housing Advice Task Group</b>
Link to Corporate Priorities	Housing
Public Report	YES

**Summary of Report**

This Report presents the findings of the Housing Advice Task Group.

Other than those implications agreed with the relevant Officers and referred to below, there are no other implications associated with this report.

Financial Implications	Legal Implications	Community & Environmental Implications	Human Resources Implications	Equality & Diversity Implications
NONE	NONE	NONE	NONE	NONE

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Housing Advice Task Group was the first Overview & Scrutiny Task Group established in the 2007/08 municipal year.
- 1.2 The Task Groups Terms of Reference were as follows:
- 1) To examine the reasons for bringing the Housing Advice Service in-house, away from the Citizens Advice Bureau.
  - 2) To determine the costs and benefits of making the change.
  - 3) To assess the impact on users of the service.
  - 4) To take views from inside and outside the Council staff, including users and the CAB
  - 5) To make recommendations for providing this service in the future.
- 1.3 The Task Groups membership was as follows: Councillors R.L. Cinnamond (Chair), S. Parker, N.M. Phillips and M.L. Singlehurst.

## **2. Background Information**

- 2.1 Between 2000 and September 2006, the Housing Advice Service was provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau, who were awarded a contract following a tendering exercise.
- 2.2 A review of the contract was carried out in early 2006, to ascertain whether it was still fit for purpose.
- 2.3 The Review was prompted by considerable changes in legislation brought about by the homelessness Act 2000 and recommended good practice produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- 2.4 Local authorities are now required to focus on preventing homelessness through a proactive approach rather than just reacting to cases of homelessness once it has occurred.
- 2.5 The Review found that the homelessness (NWDC) and advice (CAB) service lacked a focus on prevention, was limited to reacting to homelessness and providing a rights based service, was too fragmented to provide a strategic approach and was not up to date or fit for purpose.  
*Note – The Review found that both services, in so far as they went were adequately robust.*
- 2.6 The decision to bring the housing advice service in house, was made by the Executive at its meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2006.
- 2.7 The Executive decided to create a new homelessness prevention service in house (including the housing advice function) and to allow the contracting out of specialist services.
- 2.8 The Housing Advice Task Group was established by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at the meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2007.
- 2.9 The Task Group met on several occasions between July and October 2007 and considered the following evidence: the Housing Advice Review, the Executive Report and Minutes from 20<sup>th</sup> April 2006 and written and oral evidence from Officers.

### 3. Task Group Findings

3.1 The Findings of the Task Group are presented below, in respect of each of the Terms of Reference:

#### 1) To examine the reasons for bringing the Housing Advice Service in-house, away from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

The reasons for bringing the Housing Advice Service in-house, away from the Citizens Advice Bureau were as follows.

- **Cutting Costs;** The Council was paying approximately £90,000 a year to the CAB to carry out the housing advice service. It was estimated that the housing advice service could be provided in house for £50,000 a year.
- **Paying Twice;** In addition to the contract to provide housing advice, the Council has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the Citizens Advice Bureau to provide a variety of services. On close inspection, many of the services in the SLA overlap with the housing advice contract; the Council was in effect paying the Citizens Advice Bureau twice for some functions.
- **Changing Requirements;** As stated earlier, the Homelessness Act 2002 and a Code of Guidance issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, requires authorities to focus on preventing homelessness through a proactive approach. Furthermore, the introduction of BVPI 213 in April 2005, which measures the effectiveness of measuring housing advice in preventing homelessness, provides a gauge for this to be tested. The Review into housing advice found the arrangements at the time lacked a focus on prevention, were limited to reacting to homelessness and providing a rights based service, was too fragmented to provide a strategic approach and was not up to date or fit for purpose.
- **Improved Service;** By making savings of approximately £40,000, it was hoped that the Council could use the savings to provide specialist services such as benefits advice, debt advice, court representation etc. A sum of £20,000 was allocated to such schemes in the current financial year.

#### 2) To determine the costs and benefits of making the change.

##### Costs:

The Council has managed to cut costs by making the change. The housing advice service is being provided for £50,000, whilst the budget for (additional) specialist services is £20,000. This compares with the £90,000 per annum paid to the Citizens Advice Bureau to carry out the housing advice function only.

##### Benefits:

- Extra initiatives have been provided, including a mediation and a sanctuary service, with more services likely to be provided.
- Officers at the Council are able to specialise in different areas. Furthermore, the Council has access to officers with expertise in other fields, should this be required.

- The move to a homelessness prevention service (as opposed to the previous fragmented, re-active arrangements) has contributed to the prevention of homelessness:

*'In 2005/06 we prevented 20 cases of homelessness which represented 0.37% expressed as a percentage of the total number of households in the district. In 2006/07 we were able to verify that we had prevented 50 cases of homelessness representing 0.89%. This is through focussing more on preventing homelessness rather than dealing with homelessness once it has occurred. This has been through increased training and a change of culture within the team since merging together the housing advice and homelessness services in October 2006 to form a new homelessness prevention service. If household numbers remain constant, a target of 1% represents 55 cases where homelessness has been prevented. This is considered to be a realistic target for improvement with current resources.'*

Taken from the Council's performance management system (Covalent).

### **3) To assess the impact on users of the service.**

The Council's Housing Team intend to carry out a full review of the service in 2009, once it has been given ample time to bed in. The Group therefore decided not to carry out a full assessment on the impact on service users so as to avoid duplication.

They did however feel it important to compare the number of people who were given housing advice by the Council since the function came in-house with the number of people seen by the Citizens Advice Bureau, in order to examine whether people were aware that the service is now provided by the Council. Between October 2005 and June 2006, the Citizens Advice Bureau gave housing advice to 626 people. Between October 2006 and June 2007 the Council gave housing advice to 576 people.

The Task Group noted that the Citizens Advice Bureau figures included some cases (such a advice on mortgage arrears) which were not included in the NWDC figures. When taking this into account the Group estimated that the number of people given housing advice was roughly the same.

### **4) To take views from inside and outside the Council staff, including users and the CAB.**

The Task Group considered the views of Council Staff when carrying out it's work. The views of the CAB are expected ahead of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee considering this report. The Task Group has made a recommendation about seeking the views of service users (paragraph 5.1).

### **5) To make recommendations for providing this service in the future.**

- 1) That a method of customer feedback is put in place and the service tailored to the needs of customers.
- 2) That staff endeavour to keep close links with partner organisations including Westlea and the Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure a joined up customer service.
- 3) That staff ensure they keep on top of any new legislation that is forthcoming and take steps to publicise changes if necessary.

- 4) To recommend to the new Wiltshire Council that housing advice is best administered in house.
- 5) That efforts are made to publicise the service (wherever it is administered) when taken on by the unitary authority.
- 6) That the service be advertised in a way that will reach customers.

<b>Appendices:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>None</b></li> </ul>
<b>Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agendas, Reports and Notes from meetings of the Housing Advice Task Group.</li> <li>• Executive Report No.15, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2006, Housing Advice Review.</li> </ul>

**Previous Decisions Connected with this Report**

<b>Report</b>	<b>Committee &amp; Date</b>	<b>Minute Reference</b>
Report No.15 Housing Advice Review	Executive – 20 <sup>th</sup> April 2006	E224