

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

Report No.8

Date of Meeting	22nd November 2007
Title of Report	Report of the Housing Advice Task Group
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 Group's 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 carried out by an independent external consultant; Lynden Clarke.
- 2.4 The Review was prompted by considerable changes in legislation brought about by the Homelessness Act 2002 and recommended good practice produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 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. An excerpt from the Review, containing an overview of the Key Findings can be found at appendix 1.
Note – The Review found that both services, in so far as they went were adequately robust.
- 2.7 The decision to bring the housing advice service in house, was made by the Executive at its meeting on the 20th April 2006.
- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 The Housing Advice Task Group was established by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at the meeting held on 21st June 2007.
- 2.10 The Task Group met on five occasions between July and November 2007 and considered the following evidence: the Housing Advice Review, the Executive Report

and Minutes from 20th April 2006, written and oral evidence from Officers and a written representation from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

3. Task Group Findings

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

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

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

4.2 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.

One of the Key Findings of the Housing Advice Review was as follows:

‘The existing contract is significantly greater in cost than equivalent contracts in other authorities.’

4.3 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. At the time of the decision (to bring the service in-house) officers at the District Council felt that services in the SLA overlapped with the housing advice contract and that the Council was in effect paying the Citizens Advice Bureau twice for some functions.

The Task Group noted these comments and the representations from the CAB countering this claim. The Group examined both the SLA and the Housing Advice contract to see if the same functions appeared in both documents. The Group noted that it is difficult to accurately pin-point specific services which appear in both documents.

4.4 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.

4.5 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.

5. To determine the costs and benefits of making the change.

5.1 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.

5.2 Benefits:

Extra initiatives have been provided, including a mediation and a sanctuary service, with more services likely to be provided.

5.3 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.

5.4 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).

From April to October 2007, 34 cases of homelessness were prevented.

6. To assess the impact on users of the service.

6.1 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.

6.2 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.

6.3 The Task Group noted that the Citizens Advice Bureau figures included some cases (such as advice on mortgage arrears) which were not included in the NWDC figures.

7. To take views from inside and outside the Council staff, including users and the CAB.

- 7.1 The Task Group considered the views of Council Staff when carrying out it's work.
- 7.2 The CAB were given the opportunity to comment on the first draft of this report. Their comments are attached as Appendix 2. The Task Group considered the views of the CAB at its meeting on the 7th November 2007.
- 7.3 The Task Group makes the following comments in response to the CAB representations:
- 7.4 Paying Twice: The Task Group noted the CAB comments and after further investigation made amendments to the report at paragraph 4.3.
- 7.5 Changing Requirements: North Wilts CAB disagreed with the Review's findings that *'the the arrangements lacked a focus on prevention, were limiting to reacting to homelessness and providing a rights based service'*.

The Task Group noted the CAB comments but point out that the Review was undertaken by an independent external consultant; Lynden Clarke and was carried out in a thorough manner, with the input of a supervisory group composed of representatives from North Wiltshire District Council, Westlea Housing Association; North Wiltshire Citizens Advice Bureau and a service user who participated in the Supporting People review of Homelessness in Wiltshire.

- 7.6 Funding from the Legal Services Commission: The Task Group welcome this development and make a recommendation at paragraph 8.1 (6).
- 7.7 Best practice guide on homelessness prevention: The Task Group noted the recommendations and make a recommendation at paragraph 8.1 (7).

8. To make recommendations for providing this service in the future.

- 8.1 That the following recommendations be made to the Executive:
- 1) That a method of customer feedback is put in place to ensure the service is 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) That efforts are made to publicise the service (wherever it is administered) when taken on by the unitary authority.
 - 5) That the service be advertised in a way that will reach all customers.

- 6) That Officers, look to work in partnership with the CAB where appropriate to administer the funding from the Legal Services Commission secured by the CAB.
- 7) That when the service is reviewed, officers should refer to the Department of Communities and Local Government's Best practice guide on homelessness prevention.

8.2 That the following recommendation be made to both the Executive and the Transitional Board:

- That bearing in mind the changes in legislation brought about by the Homelessness Act 2000, housing advice is best administered in house in order to provide a strategic, co-ordinated, prevention based service.

Appendices:	<p>Appendix 1 – Excerpt from the Homelessness Service Review</p> <p>Appendix 2 – Response from the CAB</p>
Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agendas, Reports and Notes from meetings of the Housing Advice Task Group. • Executive Report No.15, 20th April 2006, Housing Advice Review, CLG's Best practice guide on homelessness prevention.

Previous Decisions Connected with this Report

Report	Committee & Date	Minute Reference
Report No.15 Housing Advice Review	Executive – 20 th April 2006	E224