

West Wiltshire District Council

Council

23 June 2004

**Questions from Cllr Osborn for the two Housing Portfolio Holders:
Cllrs Manasseh & Mounde**

Question 1

A constituent of mine has made a series of formal complaints concerning apparent systemic procedural failings by this council's housing advice and homeless sections.

These complaints have yet to be resolved. They have been conveyed to me in some detail and raise serious issues regarding the management and operation of these vital services.

It is now over twelve months since these services were taken "In House" members now need to know how they are serving local people.

Does the administration acknowledge that there are significant concerns with these services?

Answer 1

Any concerns that have been raised regarding the Housing Needs Service have been adequately dealt with in consultation with the CAB, Shelter and also Wood Awdry & Ford Solicitors. Regular quarterly meetings have been organised to monitor this and also regular monthly case meetings with both the CAB and Action on Homelessness.

Question 2

I understand that the services are undergoing restructuring, can members have details of this?

Answer 2

Due to government good practice guidance, on the 1st May 2004 the Housing Needs Team started working within the new structure. A team chart has been produced and will be circulated with a new leaflet that has just been approved through consultation with the CAB & Shelter and will be available this week. We have also advertised our re-structure in both the next West Wilts Matters and staff corridors.

Question 3

Has the "Taking in House" exercise been evaluated?

Answer 3

The service provided by the Housing Needs Team is quality checked and monitored by the two team leaders. We are currently developing a questionnaire for users of the service to receive feedback on their thoughts of the service.

When contracted out there was very little capacity to monitor the service, this situation has now dramatically improved and regular performance monitoring takes place at a very detailed level. Evidence of this is displayed on the office walls.

Question 4

Have we saved money?

Answer 4

Our biggest saving would have to be the expenditure on the use of temporary accommodation, in particular bed & Breakfast. In April & May 03 we had a gross expenditure of £160,000 compared this year to only £12,000 during the same months this year.

I can also show you a graph highlighting the reduced costs to the Council during the last financial year on expenditure for the use of Bed & Breakfast

Question 5

Have we improved the service?

Answer 5

We have had a difficult 12 months, however due to the new Spend 2 Save budget we are now able to prevent many clients from having to face the difficulties of becoming homeless due to the increased amount of options now available to them.
These include:-

- Private Sector Lease Properties
- Rent Deposit Grants
- Rent Deposit Loan Scheme for clients who are non-priority.
- Private Sector Liaison
- Court Representation
- Front Line Housing Option Advisors budget

Our prevention work has improved and we are actively being able to prevent families from loosing their homes and this can be seen by the reduced amount of homeless families that we now have to deal with. Therefore you must agree that this can only be better for residents within Wiltshire who are facing the difficulties of potentially being threatened with homelessness.

Question 6

Are there staffing problems?

Answer 6

We currently have no staffing problems. We have one vacant post at the moment, due to a member of staff wanting to travel for 12 months and this post is now being advertised.

Question 7

What are the arrangements for professional evaluation of client's medical condition?

Answer 7

We currently have an in house procedure to evaluate medical forms that have been completed to award extra medical points based on our allocations policy.

We will also request a medical report from a clients GP if we require a professional evaluation of a clients medical condition to determine vulnerability.

Question 8

A number of my constituents have highlighted this as an issue.

Answer 8

If any constituent has concerns regarding a medical evaluation then they should express these concerns to their case worker who will in turn be able to liase with the clients GP or any other support worker that the client is currently working with to get a more in depth report carried out.

I would be grateful if you could let me have details of any client who has expressed concerns on this issue.

Question 9

Are records kept of telephone contact between clients and the service?

Answer 9

I can assure you that records of all communication with the Housing Needs Team is documented and recorded on the clients file. A new system has recently been developed to ensure that this is done.

This is an area where improved procedures have been adopted since bringing the service in house.

Question 10

Does the service operate an appropriate and recognised software package?

Answer 10

We currently use a system called Symdell which is fully integrated housing software package which we have a licence to use from West Wiltshire Housing Society until a new system is purchased. The service has used this system since it was introduced in 1995.

We also use Academy for our rents, and again this is a recognised package that is also used by our Housing Benefits team here at West Wilts.

Question 11

How many formal complaints have the service had since coming "In House"?

Answer 11

We have received a total of 3 formal complaints two have been dealt with and have been unjustified. The third complaint was only received on 16th June 04 by Housing Needs and is currently being investigated.

The two previous complaints did raise a couple of issues that have since been dealt with and the required improvements to the service have been made.

Question 12

I request that the service be subjected to a detailed scrutiny exercise by the Internal Overview Committee.

Answer 12

I would like to confirm that in February this year a homelessness internal audit was carried out by KPMG which produced a very positive report. They had reviewed all of our systems & procedures and some of the comments made are as follows:-

On the whole procedures are well documented, up to date and tally closely with the Council's Homeless Strategy.

Processes are followed consistently by the team which results in the equal treatment of applicants (both for the Housing Register & for the Homelessness status) and also ensures a uniform level of quality and performance.

We are also due to be visited by the National Audit Office on the 22 & 23rd June 04 and they will be assessing the work we do to help prevent homelessness at a local level.

I will refer your request for a detailed scrutiny to the Chair of internal overview in order that he may consider how this can be accommodated in the work plan