



Mystery Shop Exercise of Powys County Council Housing Services by the Take Notice Project

April 2017

1.0 Introduction

During March 2017, Shelter Cymru's Take Notice Project members were invited to undertake a Mystery Shop review of the homelessness services provided by Powys County Council. The council has a duty to carry out assessments for customers that are eligible for help, homeless or in danger of losing their home.

1.1 Background

Five Take Notice Members who all have direct experience of homelessness or housing crisis agreed to play the role of Mystery Shopper for the task and worked closely with Shelter Cymru's Research Team. They represented a broad spectrum of experience of using local authority housing or homelessness services from all over Wales. This peer led approach aimed to give the local authority an insight into the effectiveness of their housing service from the perspective of the service user.

2.0 Method

The Research Team were told in advance of the task that the vast majority of initial contact between Housing Services and clients is via the phone. Powys County Council has one general telephone number for Housing Services. When a client rings to seek homelessness assistance from the local authority, the call is answered by a First Contact Officer (FCO) who takes initial information and then transfers the case immediately to the Duty Housing Management and Options Officer (DHMOO) if it is felt that the customer needs urgent assistance and/or are homeless at that point in time. Other, less urgent, cases are passed to the Housing Management and Options Officer (HMOO) to make contact with the customer via phone to follow up or make an appointment and undertake a S62 assessment.

None of the Take Notice Project members are resident in Powys so it was agreed that they would either make the call from out of county or travel to visit one of the offices. In order to avoid the DHMOOs having to get involved we agreed to largely keep the scenarios in the realm of preventative homelessness, with the exception of

two scenarios where a member was homeless/ sofa surfing at the time of the visit/phone call. Each of the five scenarios used were based on the Mystery Shopper's real experience of homelessness but with an additional element of local connection¹.

Locations

It was agreed between the Research Team and Powys County Council that all five of the county council offices were part of the exercise with both face to face and telephone presentations. The mystery shops took place at the following offices:

Ystradgynlais - This involved a face to face presentation

Llandrindod Wells - This involved a telephone call presentation

Welshpool - This involved a face to face presentation

Brecon - This involved a telephone call presentation

Newtown - This involved a telephone call presentation

Process

The Research Team worked with Powys County Council to develop scenarios that each Take Notice Member would present to Housing Service. Take Notice members undertook Mystery Shopping training with experienced members of the Research Team in advance of their presentation.

Each Take Notice Project member was issued with the following:

- A face to face or telephone presentation quick sheet (questionnaire)
- A face to face or telephone presentation expanded sheet (questionnaire)
- A scenario describing their agreed circumstances for presentation
- A list of possible questions they could be asked during the call/visit

All materials used were agreed with Powys County Council before use to ensure that the resulting feedback captured the required information.

¹ Shoppers stated they wanted to move to Powys for family related reasons

Data collection

There were two stages of data collection; the first was immediately after the presentation in the form of a quick contact sheet and at a later date in the form of a detailed questionnaire. Questions varied depending on whether the presentation was face to face or via the telephone.

The questionnaires were made up of: binary yes/no questions; Likert rating scales where members were asked to rate their agreement with particular statements; and open ended 'further comments' boxes where members were asked to elaborate on their answers. All questionnaires used for the task are attached in the Appendix.

Face to face contact quick sheet: Mystery shoppers were asked to complete this form as soon as their presentation was complete to help record their immediate feelings about the visit.

Telephone contact quick sheet: Mystery shoppers were asked to complete this form as soon as their presentation was complete to help record their immediate feelings about the visit.

Telephone contact detailed questionnaire: Participants were asked to complete this questionnaire when they returned home or once they had time to think about the service they had received.

Limitations

As discussed two mystery shops were carried out face to face with participants presenting at the Welshpool and Ystradgynlais offices. However, in both of these cases the Mystery Shoppers were not seen by a HMOO and were told to make their applications via the general telephone number instead. Both mystery shoppers followed this instruction and made their presentations by phone.

3.0 Results

This chapter will now discuss the results of the mystery shopping exercise; it will begin by focussing on the findings from the face to face presentations and then move on to explore the results from both the telephone quick sheet and detailed questionnaires. Both sections will highlight strengths and areas for improvement. A

summary of the results can be found in the Appendix along with the raw data/comments made by our Mystery Shoppers.

3.1 Face to Face presentation

The two Mystery Shoppers who presented face to face were not seen by a HMOO and were told to make their applications via the general telephone number instead. Both Mystery Shoppers followed this instruction and made the rest of their presentation by phone.

Strengths

Both Mystery Shoppers were dealt with quickly which meant that they were not waiting in the reception area for a long time. There was also a good level of information regarding Local Authority housing and homelessness services on display in the form of posters and leaflets. Welshpool also had information regarding other services available in the area.

Areas for improvement

Both Mystery Shoppers found the respective offices difficult to find as they were not easily identifiable from the outside.

“There was only a small Powys County Council sign saying ‘reception’, it did not say Housing or Housing Department”

The Ystradgynlais office had a good level of information regarding Local Authority services but there was no information highlighting other services in the area.

As noted, the two Mystery Shoppers who tried to make a homelessness application on a face to face basis were turned away from the offices that they had approached. Both participants were disappointed that this was the case and requested whether it really was not possible to see someone on that day citing difficulties such as: having travelled a significant distance to attend on that day, that they would not be able to get a lift to do so again and that they had nowhere to stay that night.

In both instances they were told that the only option was to make the application by phone and both were left waiting for a return phone call. However, some service users might need extra support and a face to face meeting might be better suited to their needs than a telephone call for a number of reasons including communication needs and to help facilitate rapport.

3.2 Telephone presentation

The phone call of one of the Mystery Shoppers was cut off after listening to the declaration. The impression the shopper received of the two call handlers they spoke to were very different. Therefore, they chose to evaluate both call handlers separately to reflect the two different experiences.

Due to personal circumstances one of the project members only answered the telephone quick sheet and was not able to answer the expanded sheet.

The overall number of respondents for the telephone quick sheet questionnaires was six and the overall number of respondents for the expanded telephone questionnaires was five.

Strengths

Some participants felt that they had received a genuinely helpful and empathetic service from the FCOs, despite the fact that no actual advice or information was given in relation to their housing situations. They praised the fact that they were properly listened to, given time to explain their situation and spoken to in a friendly and polite manner. They did not feel that the lack of actual housing advice given was an issue in the cases when it was properly explained that the FCOs are a 'triage' service. In these instances higher levels of satisfaction with the overall experience were expressed than when this was not explained to the service user.

"Couldn't really ask for more, very polite, not rushed in them asking me questions and gave me time to answer"

There were commendations given to the fact that bilingual options were offered in five out of the six cases. In addition, four out of five of the members' communication needs were asked about and established.

"Yes, went through the whole gamut of communication difficulties, physical disabilities or any special needs"

Although the specific questions asked in the questionnaires did not elicit this information directly, participants also shared their feelings about the fact that they were not asked about local connection. They were pleased about this because it meant that they weren't turned away from the service simply because they were not currently resident in the county. None of the participants were told to return to their own county homelessness teams for assistance.

Areas for improvement

Whilst some participants felt that they were listened to with respect and understanding, this was not the case for all Mystery Shoppers and at the opposite

end of the spectrum participants felt that their situation/call was received disinterestedly and that the call handlers were simply “going through the motions”.

“I felt as though the call was boring for the contact. Perhaps apathy would be the right word. The contact was polite but uninterested”.

Only one out of the five members rated the staff member they spoke to as knowledgeable and helpful with some Mystery Shoppers recognising that being knowledgeable was not necessarily the remit of the FCO.

“the officer was very ‘matter of fact’ about my application and didn’t ask any questions outside of the basics and what was minimally required to complete the call”.

When making the presentation via telephone, the average time spent on the call from start to finish was 12 minutes. Four minutes on average was spent waiting for the call to be answered. Fifty per cent of the Mystery Shoppers had their calls transferred to another person during the call. The members raised some concerns regarding the practicality and affordability of this.

“It took eight minutes to be answered [when on hold], way too long if I was on a pay to go mobile phone I would have been panicking about credit. When I finally spoke to someone, I was transferred to another person and it took another three or four minutes to go through. Not once did anybody enquire about me being able to afford the call”

None of the Mystery Shoppers got beyond the FCO. This is despite the fact that in two of the scenarios used, the individual was already homeless and sofa-surfing. The amount of time they were told they would need to wait for a return phone call varied from “a couple of days” to “a couple of weeks”. Only two out of five of the Mystery Shoppers understood what the council were going to do next, and why. Participants stated that this left them feeling uncertain about what would happen next.

“All I was told was that someone would be in touch with me. I had to ask for the timescale and was told that due to the department being busy it could take a week or so. I was left feeling confused and uninformed. I was neither told I would receive help or that I wouldn’t, leading me to worry about what I should be doing next and if the housing department couldn’t help, who would?”

Despite some scenarios incorporating additional support needs (examples included mental ill health, substance misuse, physical health needs) there was a lack of signposting to other agencies that might be able to assist in all of the cases. The Mystery Shoppers expressed significant disappointment with this and felt that this was not beyond the remit of the FCOs.

“At no point was I signposted to any other organisation even when I explained about my disabilities and being a single parent....no practical help was given or offered”

Mystery Shoppers felt that any advice or signposting would have been crucial during the time that they were going to have to wait for a call back. People are willing to help themselves and seek other advice and support but need to be told what these alternative services are and how they can contact them.

“With my own knowledge of other agencies I was surprised that there was no signposting, even when I mentioned my health problems and how this situation was negatively affecting me with anxiety”.

In five out of six cases the name of the call handler was not offered and only volunteered when asked for. The participants generally felt that they should not have had to ask for this information. If people know who they are talking to it makes the call feel more personal, they would also know who to ask for if they needed to ring back and contact the council again. No contact information was provided for five out of the six shoppers to follow up their case.

“I believe they were going to call me back within a couple of days but I don’t know any more than that at this point”

4.0 Conclusion

The experiences of the Mystery Shoppers varied considerably and suggest that there may be a lack of consistency across the service. Some Mystery Shoppers felt that they had received a helpful and empathetic service from the FCOs giving praise to the fact that they were properly listened to, given time to explain their situation and spoken to in a friendly and polite manner. They did not feel that the lack of actual housing advice given was an issue in the cases when it was properly explained that the FCOs are a ‘triage’ service. In these instances higher levels of satisfaction with the overall experience were expressed than when this was not explained.

However, others felt that, although they were not treated disrespectfully, they did not receive any helpful information or guidance on their current housing crisis.

It is hoped that the feedback given in this report is considered constructive and valuable. The Take Notice Project members would be willing to follow up this exercise and discuss findings and their experiences directly to housing staff and managers in Powys County Council on request.

5.0 Recommendations

- Consistent responses from call handlers - calls should be handled sensitively and compassionately. Including housing staff providing names and contact details for clients to follow up their case.
- Provision for face to face presentations - Telephone presentations may not be suitable or appropriate in every circumstance and efforts should be made to facilitate and respond adequately to direct presentations.
- Urgent cases are referred - In cases where an individual is homeless a referral should be made to a DHMOO to ensure a timely response.
- More clarity around next steps – for all applicants, including those threatened with homelessness, more certainty needed around call-back times, and what to do if their situation changes or becomes more serious in the meantime.
- Signposting - Where a client presents with other additional support needs housing staff should be able to signpost them to other relevant sources of support and advice or to agencies who may be able to assist with the housing crisis itself.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Face to face contact quick sheet results

(Two mystery shops were carried out face to face with participants presenting at Welshpool and Ystradgynlais offices. However please note that in both these cases the mystery shoppers were not seen by a housing officer and were told to make their applications by phone instead. Both mystery shoppers followed this instruction and made their presentations by phone.

Therefore the results below show their findings only up to question 7 of the first questionnaire as the remaining questions were not applicable having not seen a housing officer).

1. Was the office easy to find?

Yes = 0

No = 2

Sample feedback:

“There was only a small Powys County Council sign saying ‘reception’, it did not say Housing or Housing Department”

2. How long were you waiting to be seen (approximately)?

The average wait time was 2 ½ minutes before the mystery shopper was seen by the receptionist.

3. Was the office environment welcoming and comfortable?

Yes 1

No 1

4. Was the officer wearing a name badge?

Yes = 0

No = 1

N/A = 1 “I did not speak to a housing officer, just the receptionist”

5. How long did your presentation last? (approximately) (count from the moment you saw the officer until you left the building, do not include the time you spent waiting for your appointment in reception)

Neither participant saw a housing officer, no presentation took place, however each person said that they were in reception for approximately 1-2 minutes.

6. Were there leaflets or posters about the local authority housing and homelessness service available in the reception area?

Yes = 2

No = 0

7. Were there leaflets or posters about other local services available in the reception area?

Yes = 1

No = 1

Appendix 2

Telephone contact quick sheet

1. Was the contact information for Powys County Council's Housing Service easy to find?

Yes = 6

No = 0

2. How long did you wait on the phone before your call was answered (approximately)?

The average wait time was 4 mins.

Sample feedback

"Over 5 minutes before I spoke to somebody, it felt like a long time; a message told me as soon as somebody is free I will speak to them but not which place I am in the queue."

3. Were you given the option for your call to be dealt with in both English and Welsh?

Yes = 5

No = 1

Sample feedback

"This was difficult to answer as I was asked whether I speak Welsh (which I said yes) but not if I wanted to conduct the interview in Welsh".

4. Did the person who took your call tell you their name?

Yes = 1

No = 5

Sample feedback:

"Did so when asked"

"I didn't ask so wasn't told the name"

- 5. How long did the phone call last (approximately)? (count from the moment your call was answered to until you put the phone down, do not include the time you spent waiting for the call to be answered).**

The average time spent on the phone was 12 minutes (the shortest call was 4 minutes, the longest was 31 minutes).

Sample feedback:

“The 31 minutes that the call took was way too long, the long silences I experienced made me feel insecure with no explanation as to why until the call ended. Though the adviser was polite there was no empathy or curiosity as to why I was in this situation and I had to stop myself from prompting the adviser too much as it would have given away how much I really did know about procedure. I will reiterate that if this had been a genuine call and that I’d been using a pay as you go mobile phone, I wouldn’t have been able to continue the call due to how long it took over all which was 39 minutes”

- 6. Was your call transferred to another person?**

Yes = 3

No = 3

- 7. Did the housing officer speak to you with courtesy and respect?**

Yes = 3

No = 3

Sample feedback:

“the lady explained to me that all she can do is take my information”

- 8. Did you feel that the housing officer you spoke to listened to you and let you explain your situation in full?**

Yes = 3

No = 3

- 9. Did you feel that the staff member you spoke to was knowledgeable and helpful?**

Yes = 1

No = 3

N/A = 2 (two mystery shoppers answered this question as not applicable “I can’t judge as I would have to wait for a call back”).

10. Were you asked whether you had any language or communication needs?

Yes = 4

No = 1

(one mystery shopper did not answer this question because they could not remember whether they were asked)

11. Were you told about or signposted to any other services that could help you?

Yes = 1

No = 5

12. Was the information you were given easy to understand?

Yes = 3

No = 1

N/A = 2 (two mystery shoppers answered this question as not applicable "what information? They just took my details")

13. Did the staff member explain how the authority can or cannot help you?

Yes = 1

No = 4

N/A = 1 (one mystery shoppers answered this question as not applicable "no explanation as I guess most information is supposed to follow in the second call")

14. Were you given a timescale for anything that would happen next? (e.g follow up appointment, call back, when a decision would be made?)

Yes = 6

No = 0

15. Were Personal Housing Plans mentioned to you?* only 5 people answered this question

Yes = 5

No = 0

16. Were you provided with contact details from someone at the authority for follow up queries?

Yes = 1

No = 5

17. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

I found the overall experience positive:

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 2

"I started my journey, she was friendly"

agree = 0

neither agree nor disagree = 2

disagree = 1

totally disagree = 1

I would recommend the service to others:

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 0

agree = 1

neither agree nor disagree = 3

"don't feel as if I received a full service"

disagree = 1

totally disagree = 1

Staff are friendly and polite

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 3

agree = 1

neither agree nor disagree = 2

disagree = 0

totally disagree = 0

Staff gave me the information I needed:

Scores

totally agree = 0

agree = 1

neither agree nor disagree = 2

disagree = 1

totally disagree = 1

Sample feedback

Appendix 3

Telephone contact detailed questionnaire

1. Tell us about your initial experience of making the phone call (e.g. how did you feel about the amount of time it took for your call to be answered, was it appropriate? Did you find the phone numbers easily? If you were transferred to a second person did you have to explain your situation a second time?)

“My call was answered and dealt with quite quickly. I was transferred to a housing officer that did not give her name; I was only asked very basic questions regarding my application (name, DOB, current housing situation, sexual preference). I wasn’t asked anything about the wider issues regarding my situation. I was given no advice or signposting to other services that may help me. I was told to expect a call back sometime in the next few days. The call was ended there.”

“It took 8 minutes to be answered, way too long if I was on a pay to go mobile phone I would have been panicking about credit. When I finally spoke to someone, I was transferred to another person and it took another 3 or 4 mins to go through. Not once did anybody enquire about me being able to afford the call. At one point, during the initial 8 minutes, I thought about hanging up and calling again but realised that if I was using a mobile phone, it would end up costing me a lot more, I even wondered if I’d actually be spoken to. When I did speak to someone, my request was met with confusion, the contact asked if I wanted to speak to a benefits adviser even though I quite clearly asked about an impending eviction and what I could do about it. I was transferred to another person which as I stated earlier took another 3 or 4 minutes, more time that I was worried about and felt like my call wasn’t very important. I explained myself a second time when the call was answered but very minimal questions were asked.”

“The phone number for PCC housing was actually given to me by a member of staff at the Welshpool office but it is very easy to find using a search online. Phone call was answered very quickly and after a few questions I was transferred to an automated recording to do with ‘terms and conditions’ type stuff, rules and regs, it was explained before being transferred that I may be speaking to a different person once this automated part of call was over, and it was a different person as it happens. I did have to repeat a few bits of info I’d already given but this wasn’t a drama - name, address, DOB and my NI number”.

“I asked the person whether I was speaking to a housing officer, she replied ‘this is the housing department.’ I then asked her again whether she was a housing officer and she replied ‘yes’. She gave me her name when asked. She did not interrupt the narrative that I was giving but made no response, so it was difficult to ascertain what her response was. I was put through to listen to ‘declaration’, then the line was cut off”.

“This call was made as a result of being cut off. The call handler was helpful and answered all my questions in an open way and explained the process and reassured me that it would be brief”.

2. I was spoken to with courtesy and respect

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 2

“an incredibly warm and empathetic individual who was obviously deploying reflective listening skills, her voice was warmly reassuring”.

agree = 0

“couldn’t really ask for more, very polite, not rushed in them asking me questions and gave me time to answer. Very good I think”.

neither agree nor disagree = 2

“the agent I spoke to was neither disrespectful nor particularly courteous. She spoke in an almost monotone manner”.

“I had to ask her a second time to confirm her professional status, the tone of her voice suggested she was not best pleased...she was not directly rude or actively hostile. When I discovered from the second call that she was not a housing officer I felt that she had been deceptive”.

disagree = 1

“I felt as though the call was boring for the contact. Perhaps apathy would be the right word. The contact was polite but uninterested”.

totally disagree = 0

3. I felt confident that the local authority listened to my housing problem and understood my situation

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 1

“able in very few words to indicate that she had got the gist of my housing crisis”

agree = 1

“the people I spoke to seemed to understand my needs but then left me with – you’ll receive a call in a couple of days”

neither agree nor disagree = 1

“couldn’t gauge this as there were no interruptions to my narrative”

disagree = 1

“I felt as though the housing officer didn’t really care either way about my situation. Once the required

questions were asked, that was the end of her duty to me...I didn't feel listened to at all really.

totally disagree = 1

"I didn't give a full account of my situation as no leading questions were put to me. Again I feel that the contact didn't really care about my circumstances and was just ticking off answers. I had to clarify my situation a few times and even then I was met with silence".

4. The staff members/s I spoke to were knowledgeable and helpful

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 1

"[they] explained the 'triage' process, asked relevant questions in a meaningful way and was able to guide me through the application and reassured me that within two days a housing officer would get back to me. She answered all questions in an open way".

agree = 0

neither agree nor disagree = 2

"The questions were straight from a format...there was no need for anybody to be knowledgeable. All the people I spoke to were very nice though"

disagree = 1

"I was not offered any advice on my situation nor was I signposted to any other services that may help me. The officer told me that I may not be entitled to housing benefit without knowing anything about my circumstances. This worried me".

totally disagree = 1

"at no point was I signposted to any other organisation even when I explained about my disabilities and being a single parent....no practical help was given or offered"

5. I was asked if I had any communication or additional support needs

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 2

"Yes, went through the whole gamut of communication difficulties, physical disabilities or any special needs"

agree = 0

neither agree nor disagree = 1

disagree = 1

"I was asked if I'd like to conduct my application in English or Welsh but wasn't asked about any other needs other than if I was disabled or not"

totally disagree = 1

"I had to mention my disabilities, no questions were asked. I was asked to spell out my medical conditions. I explained that I had dyslexia and dyspraxia, the advisor still expected me to be able to spell out the words"

5a. If yes, did you feel staff were sensitive to your needs?

Yes = 1

No = 2

Sample feedback:

"Just through the tone of her voice she was displaying to me that she was 'engaged' in my situation".

"the officer was very 'matter of fact' about my application and didn't ask any questions outside of the basics and what was minimally required to complete the call".

6. I was told of other agencies that might be able to help me and how I could get in contact with them

Scores

Sample feedback

totally agree = 0

agree = 0

neither agree nor disagree = 0

disagree = 1

totally disagree = 4

"not at all; with my own knowledge of other agencies I was surprised that there was no signposting, even when I mentioned my health problems and how this situation was negatively affecting me with anxiety".

"I was not offered any other help, not even sign posting to third sector organisations like Mind, Camfan, Citizens advice or Shelter Cymru to name a few that could have helped me in the interim whilst waiting for a call back that could have taken a week or more"

7. The verbal advice and information given to me was clear and easy to understand

Scores

totally agree = 2

agree = 1

neither agree nor disagree = 0

disagree = 0

totally disagree = 2

Sample feedback

“articulate and deployed easy to understand language free of professional jargon”

“Given that this was the very bare minimum at what was going to be an ‘unexplained process’, the answer must be tentatively yes”

“For each question asked and answered a long a long silence ensued leading me to think, at some points, that there was no one at the other end of the phone except when I could hear another advisor taking on the phone to another client about rent debt. I was given no advice or information as to what I should be doing next to help my situation, just questions that took seconds to answer but were so spaced apart that I felt that no-one was there, it was only at the end of the call that the adviser told me there was some computer issues and that was why everything took so long. I felt that my call wasn’t important”

8. At the end of the phone call I understood what the council were going to do to help me OR if they were not able to help me the reason why

Scores

totally agree = 1

agree = 1

neither agree nor disagree = 0

Sample feedback

“Yes, I had been asked where I wanted to live. I was informed that I had met the eligibility criteria for help”.

“All I was told was that someone would be in touch with me. I had to ask for the timescale and was told that due to the department being busy it could take a week or so. I was left feeling confused and uninformed. I was neither told I would receive help or that I wouldn’t, leading me to worry about what I should be doing next and if the housing department couldn’t help, who would?”

disagree = 2

“At the end of the call I was told that someone else would call me sometime over the next few days. That was it.”

totally disagree = 1

“I believe they were going to call me back within a couple of days but I don’t know any more than that at this point”

9. The Equal Ground Standard states that you should be given correct information. How did the advice, help and information you were given compare to what you were meant to have received? (please use the scenario correct response to answer this question)

The response from the local authority exceeded my expectations

The response from the local authority met my expectations

The response from the local authority did not meet my expectations

In asking this question it was expected that at least some of the mystery shoppers would speak to a housing officer and that they would then be able to compare the advice and information given with the legally correct information which was provided by our Housing Law Caseworker. However, in all 5 presentations, the mystery shoppers only spoke to the First Contact Officers who took information from the client but did not give housing advice related to their scenario. Therefore we asked the participants not to answer this question.