

Review of housing related support services – final report

Waverley Borough Council

OCTOBER 2015

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1. Background

Waverley Borough Council (WBC) appointed HQN to carry out a review of its housing related support services, ie:

- Tenancy and estates team
- Housing options team
- Specialist housing options advice
- Family support team
- Welfare benefits officer
- Don't lose your home officer
- Floating support for sheltered housing
- Easy move officer.

The sheltered housing team has recently undergone a restructuring and was outside the remit of the review, but we have considered its work and the way this will evolve in bringing together the recommendations arising from this report. The services provided by WBC's external partners have also been considered.

HQN would like to thank all the staff at WBC for their co-operation with this review, for providing information as requested, and being open to challenge about their work.

2. The brief and our methodology

WBC is a stock-holding authority. Some of the services included in this review are offered only to WBC tenants, others are offered regardless of tenure. WBC is not looking to make savings from the services, but to ensure value for money and to maximise the impact that the services have. Some of the services benefit from external funding which is time-limited, so there is also a need to future-proof services where possible.

The brief required the following outcomes:

- A clear process for residents who need to access a service to ensure a consistent and unified approach irrespective of point of entry
- A service that has clear common goals
- Customer service standards to manage customer expectations, ie, what we can do, what we can't do, what our customers need to do themselves

- A way in which all the support services being provided to residents can be recorded and monitored through a single case management approach
- A service that provides value for money, can be delivered without an increase in costs and maximises the use of external funding
- A recommendation for how to implement the outcomes of the review.

In addition, the brief talked about the need for a clear understanding 'about what services we (WBC) are able to provide ourselves, what services are provided by other organisations and available to our residents and what services are beyond the scope of the Council.' The brief highlighted the need to avoid residents being caught in a cycle of referrals from one agency to another.

The brief identified a number of issues with the current services, including:

- Overlaps between services
- Lack of information sharing
- Lack of knowledge amongst staff about different services
- Lack of knowledge amongst residents about what is on offer
- Risks arising from inconsistent approaches to, eg, safeguarding.

All of the above have informed our approach and the recommendations discussed in this report.

The work was carried out by HQN associates Wendy Murphy and Grenville Hague, specialists in strategic housing and support and care. The work was carried out between July and September 2015 and included

- A desk-top assessment of information gathered from WBC and from HQN's own pool of knowledge
- Interviews with individual members of staff and with the various staff teams
- Two workshops with external partners
- Telephone interviews with external partners and stakeholders.

In addition, two workshops have been held with staff to share the findings.

3. The key recommendations

Based on our findings this report recommends that:

- Services for those above working age (ie, sheltered housing floating support service, easy move) should be bought together to form one service for older people. Consideration should also be given to moving the adaptations work currently carried out by the Tenancy and Estates team into the new service. There should be one referral and assessment process and one risk assessment process. Records should be held in one place so that they can be assessed by anyone in the new team
- Services for working age tenants should be delivered through a “virtual team”. Referrals could come in to any service within the team but will be assessed in a consistent way and where appropriate referred on to a different service. Any of the services will be able to see which other services the customer is in receipt of, and information will be shared as far as practicable. Posts will remain where they are in the current structure for line management and reporting.

The above recommendations will streamline the process making it more efficient, easier to understand and more customer focused as demonstrated in the table below:

| Older persons housing service | Support services for those of working age |
|---|--|
| The services | The services |
| Expanded team including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Existing sheltered housing team ▪ Easymove officer ▪ Consideration should be given to moving adaptations work for council tenants into this team | Virtual team including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family support team ▪ Specialist housing options advice ▪ Welfare benefits officer ▪ Don't Lose Your Home officer |
| Benefits | Benefits |
| All support services for working age residents in one place, holistic assessment, referral to most appropriate service, one risk assessment process, shared information = better outcomes for older customers | Consistent assessment process and referral to most appropriate service Shared information = better outcomes for customers of working age |

Set out below is the summary of our recommendations against the required outcomes of the brief:

| Required outcomes | Recommendations |
|---|---|
| <p>A clear process for residents who need to access a service to ensure a consistent and unified approach irrespective of point of entry.</p> | <p>Under our recommendations there would be two clear points of access, one for those above working age and one for those of working age. In both cases there would be a clear process to access the service and a common assessment process.</p> |
| <p>A service that has clear common goals.</p> | <p>Each of the new services would have a slightly different focus.</p> <p>For the older persons housing service, the clear goal would be to support people to live independently within the community, including adapting the existing property or making a move to more appropriate housing. Underpinning this core goal would be a range of goals around health and well-being.</p> <p>For the working age support service, the clear goal would be to sustain the existing tenancy. A range of performance indicators would underpin this, from maximising income to minimising anti-social behaviour.</p> |
| <p>Customer service standards to manage customer expectations, ie, what we can do, what we can't do, what our customers need to do themselves.</p> | <p>There is some danger that the creation of broader services in this way could raise expectations and this will need to be managed with partners, in particular. For the individual customer, the sheltered housing team and the housing options team already have good examples of contracts setting out what the service will provide and what the customer will do for themselves, and these can be adapted for other services.</p> |
| <p>A way in which all the support services being provided to residents can be recorded and monitored through a single case management approach.</p> | <p>The new services will provide a single case management approach and much more information sharing. We have only taken an overview of the IT systems and what is practicable, but it would appear that the planned implementation of the Orchard dashboard offers the opportunity to bring the relevant information together in one place. The Family Support team uses SharePoint and should continue to do so, but upload and download relevant information to and from the Orchard dashboard.</p> |

| Required outcomes | Recommendations |
|--|---|
| <p>A service that provides value for money, can be delivered without an increase in costs and maximises the use of external funding.</p> | <p>Our recommendations can be delivered without any increase in cost, and also position the services to maximise external funding, particularly the older persons housing service which could attract funding from health/social care partners and also private payers.</p> <p>Some services are embedded into wider teams, which makes it difficult to assess value for money for that element of the service. We have examined HouseMark benchmarking figures for performance and also for the staffing ratios in the tenancy and estates team, and comment further on this in the relevant section below.</p> <p>Some services are required to evidence value for money in order to secure external funding, others are clearly delivering savings on other WBC budgets.</p> |
| <p>A recommendation for how to implement the outcomes of the review</p> | <p>We have worked closely with all teams affected to develop these recommendations. The next stage will be some staff workshops to consider the way forward. We anticipate that many staff will be enthusiastic about the outcomes and keen to take the work forward.</p> |

Detailed findings and recommendations for each service are set out in section 7.

4. The considerations underlying our key recommendations

4.1 Value for money and future-proofing housing-related support services

Part of the brief was to look at how best to future-proof these services. Many WBC funded services are funded from the HRA which is under increased pressure because of the cut in rental income. Although our brief does not require services to make savings, it does emphasise value for money and the need to evidence this. Alternative funding options also require evidence of savings delivered for other services, particularly health and social care. The brief was drawn up prior to the announcement about cuts in rent funding. This makes it even more important that all services can evidence the impact they are having, and where appropriate the savings they are delivering for WBC and for wider public sector budgets.

Partners are also experiencing similar budget pressures, particularly those partners who are wholly or partly dependent on public sector funding. It is notable that some partners have experienced increased funding, such as CAB which has had significant funding through national programmes to help mitigate the impact of welfare reform. WBC already

works closely with CAB and the officers we spoke to are generally very aware of the services on offer.

Despite the pressure on health and social care budgets there is definitely scope for receiving funding from these sources. This is not an easy option, but it is one that is worth pursuing. There is also scope to develop services which are paid for by the client: floating support and easy move being prime examples of this. Although we have not tested the views of clients, partner agencies feel strongly that a significant proportion of potential clients are both able and willing to pay for services. For those on lower incomes, many have individual budgets and can choose how they wish to spend their care funding. Many will feel more confident working with the Council rather than trying to choose from a myriad of smaller organisations.

Other changes point to an increased need for housing related support amongst council tenants. A proportion of WBC tenants are likely to be affected by the 'Pay to Stay' proposals, although it is not feasible to estimate numbers until detail is provided later this year. A key question is whether or not a taper will be applied, so that those whose income is just above cut-off points will pay more but not the full market rent. At present the government does not appear comfortable with the idea of a taper but this may change over the next few weeks. If there is no taper, a number of households will find themselves struggling to pay a significantly increased rent, and may require support with household budgeting, etc. The CAB are probably best placed to provide this service as these households will not be eligible for benefits.

The recent introduction of flexible tenancies will make it easier for WBC to manage the impact of 'Pay to Stay.' There will be additional work arising from flexible tenancies but this supports the direction of travel towards a more proactive service. Changes in the population profile of WBC, particularly the higher numbers of older and 'older older' people, will also put pressure on some services. The introduction of the older persons housing service recommended in this report is in direct response to that changing need.

A combination of policy changes, changes in customer expectations and technology are driving greater emphasis on customer choice, reducing dependence, and 'co-creation' of services. Our recommendations support choice and independence. Access to greater information and services on-line would also support this direction of travel and this is discussed further below.

Overall, then, our recommendations seek to 'future proof' services as far as possible, and anticipate known and likely changes in the sector.

4.2 Information-sharing

For some of the services, the main recommendation is focused on greater sharing of information about the clients they are working with, so that each team has a full picture of the services the client is accessing. This will improve the service for the customer, minimise duplication and maximise the impact of those services.

It is tempting to think that SharePoint would be the easiest solution, as the Council's intention is to run SharePoint out as a corporate tool. SharePoint would have the advantage of easy access for all teams to relevant data about support needs and what support is being provided. It should also be capable of uploading data from a variety of different operating systems, reducing the need for manual or duplicate data entry. However, as we understand it, SharePoint is effectively a document management system with no embedded workflow. Although SharePoint may be the best solution for the older persons housing service, it may not be the best solution for other services.

The alternative would be to use Orchard, which is used by all the services for working age tenants apart from the family support service. There is a project already planned to implement a customer dashboard for Orchard which would provide a flexible and easy to use solution. There would be no additional cost beyond that already budgeted.

The customer dashboard would need to contain relevant information, eg:

- Customers name
- Customers address (this may not be appropriate for some DV cases)
- Agreed identifiers, normally date of birth and national insurance number
- Referral source
- Type of support being given, including support officer and intensity.

Where inclusion of the address might put the individual at risk this can be excluded and an officer contact details given instead. There is already a procedure within the housing options team to deal with sensitive cases which can be expanded to cover other services.

We have noted that there are a number of directories or registers of voluntary sector services; different officers use different directories and there is concern that none are completely up to date. Smaller, very local services are often not included in these directories. There is no easy answer to this problem – it is clear that WBC has tried a number of different approaches over the years. If, however, WBC officers committed to one of the directories on offer, this would reinforce its importance and encourage organisations to ensure it is up to date. This does not mean that WBC has to do the work to keep it up to date, rather by focusing attention on one of the various directories WBC would be supporting the 'owner' to update it. WBC already has an area on the website for this information, with each organisation able to update its own details. Interestingly, most staff do not use this directory, but access one provided by Voluntary Action SW Surrey. There may be merit in WBC either offering to host the VASWS directory or providing a link from its website. An up to date directory is important if staff are to refer appropriate clients to other, external services.

4.3 One point of access

At the moment, clients access individual services and little consideration is given to whether the service being requested is the best one for them at that moment in time. Clients are often not aware of other services which could be provided. Our recommendations create one point of access for older people. This is critical, as there is a much wider range of services they can benefit from which many older people will not be aware of. It also means that the assessment can look to the future and not just provide a solution which may only be appropriate for a short period of time.

For other services, one point of access is less important than ensuring that when the client accesses a service, the officer dealing with the request has a full knowledge of other services they are receiving and is able to consider whether their own service is the most appropriate one at this point in time or whether they should be referring on. Referring on should be just that: passing over all the information collected to date, so that the tenant does not need to give the information twice. This can be achieved through a 'virtual' single entry point, with a consistent assessment using shared and agreed criteria.

5. Detailed findings and recommendations for each service

The baseline assessment confirms the concerns and issues raised in WBC's brief for the work. Whilst all of the housing-related support services are delivering good outcomes, each appears to be run in isolation from the others. Customers are generally offered the service they approach, with little consideration as to whether a different service might be more appropriate. Lack of data-sharing means that nobody has an overall view of the customers' needs.

We have taken each service and commented on it below.

5.1 Tenancy and estates

The brief stated:

Tenancy and estates officers provide housing management services to about 5,000 tenants living in Council-owned homes in Waverley to enable them to maintain their tenancies. Each officer manages a geographical 'patch' of about 1,000 properties. Their work includes dealing with neighbour disputes, noise nuisance, anti-social behaviour, estate management issues and compliance with tenancy conditions. More intensive housing management for vulnerable tenants or those with ongoing issues is provided by two intervention officers. Initial service requests are dealt with by office-based tenancy and estates co-ordinators.

5.1.1 Our findings

Although the interventions officer posts were intended to work as indicated above, in practice this has not panned out on the ground. At the time of our initial interviews only one

of the two posts was filled, and this officer was spending the majority of her time dealing with aids and adaptations in council properties – which was her previous role. She was carrying out some interventions work, mainly around hoarding. We understand that the second post has now been filled, and this person is working to the job description.

There has been much debate about whether the patch sizes for the housing officers are too big. Housing management costs in Waverley are low compared to the HouseMark Peer Group (2013/14 figures) and have reduced significantly since the previous year. WBC is currently shown as upper quartile on this indicator. This would indicate that staffing levels are relatively low compared to other authorities. WBC would like to move to a more proactive service, and this is supported by officers, but they feel they do not have the capacity to deliver more than a reactive service at present.

The interventions officer posts have the potential to make a difference to the tenancy and estates team, but there are some significant challenges. There needs to be a strong mutual understanding between the housing officers and the interventions officers on the focus of the interventions officer role, referral and handover arrangements. Because there was no-one in post at the time of our interviews, we have not been able to test this. However, in our initial interviews it was clear that some officers on the tenancy and estates team were unclear about how the new role would work. If the boundaries are not clear, there is a risk of a perverse incentive operating, whereby housing officers may be tempted to allow problem cases to build so that they can be handed over, rather than tackling them at the earliest opportunity.

A further issue arose around whether the roles would have the capacity to provide the intensive support required or whether they would end up doing a lot of sign posting to other sources of support. It is clear from the job description that the post is required to do both: reference is made to holding a caseload of complex or escalated cases, and providing practical support, as well as sign-posting to other services where appropriate, however there was some scepticism about whether this was realistic.

Rent arrears are dealt with by the income team. We were surprised that there appears to be little communication between the two teams, so that officers working to sustain a tenancy at risk because of ASB are not always aware of whether there are also arrears on the tenancy.

Rent loss due to voids appears to be an issue for WBC, with the financial loss increasing between 2012/13 and 2013/14. In the HouseMark report, performance is shown as lower quartile. Both void rates and the time taken to let properties have increased. At first sight, this issue might appear to be outside the remit of the review of housing related support, but it may be that the increase in void rates reflects tenants getting into difficulties and leaving their accommodation prior to steps being taken to repossess.

5.1.2 Recommendations

Our recommendation is that WBC should seek to reduce patch sizes for the housing officers. This will involve reviewing the resources on the team to ensure that best use is

being made of all the available resource. This would create capacity to work more proactively.

Consideration should also be given to passing the adaptations work carried out by the team to the new older persons housing service. This will enable a more holistic assessment of need and should help to control the adaptations budget. These recommendations will impact on the team structure which will require further consideration. There are some significant advantages to passing the adaptations work across to the new older persons housing service. The new service will ensure that all options for the older person are considered and that adaptations are seen in the context of wider support needs. A common assessment process will ensure that all support needs are considered together, and give access to floating support and the easy move service. The population profile for Waverley, and feedback from the tenancy and estates team and other teams, suggest that there will be ongoing demand for adaptations by council tenants and this wider context is needed in order to manage the impact on the budget. There does need to be much greater monitoring not just of the case-load, but of the outcomes and benefits of the work undertaken – particularly the potential savings for care and health sectors.

Communication between the income team and interventions officers needs to be improved. Any changes to patch sizes will need to consider co-terminosity, as at the moment the patches are mirrored across both teams.

It is notoriously difficult to collect robust information about the reasons for someone ending a tenancy, but at the least WBC should be monitoring whether or not notice has been given on a property, and whether or not there were arrears or reported ASB incidents associated with the tenancy at the time it came to an end. This will give a greater understanding of the context for the rise in voids.

There would still be a range of support services available for working age tenants. Financial difficulties will be picked up by the rents team, and support given by the welfare benefits officer. Council tenants also make up a significant proportion of the caseload of the Family Support Team.

5.2 Family support

The brief stated:

Family support is provided by a dedicated team of officers who are part-funded by Surrey County Council. Subject to a set of defined criteria, families can receive intensive intervention for a 12-week period, at the end of which a package of ongoing support provided by external agencies is set up as required.

5.2.1 Our findings

The Family Support Team was set up to deliver the government's 'troubled families' programme, and now continues with financial support from the County. Record keeping is exemplary, partly driven by funding being payable on evidenced outcomes.

In theory, the Family Support Team (FST) works across tenures. In practice, almost all cases are social housing tenants, a sizeable majority being council tenants and a smaller number of RP tenants, with occasional tenants who rent privately. The FST work with a wide range of other services, many of their clients will continue to receive support from partners during the period that the FST are involved with them and on-going afterwards. It is interesting that information flows between the FST and external partners are often better than between the FST and the Tenancy and Estates team. There are some relatively simple steps that can be taken to improve internal communication and to ensure that outcomes delivered continue to be sustained once the FST are no longer involved.

A number of officers we interviewed spoke of the fact that they have to support FST clients once the FST are no longer involved. This suggests a lack of understanding of the role of the FST and a need for clearer procedures and protocols for handover of information when clients have completed the FST programme. In part this can be met by better awareness of the role of the team, but we also feel that a formal handover should be arranged once the FST involvement comes to an end. This will help to ensure a smooth transition for the client, give the housing officer a good grasp of the progress made and challenges still to be met, and ensure that all relevant information is passed across.

There is a multi-agency panel supporting the work of the FST, this could be expanded to cover the relevant support services that will sit in the virtual team. The FST could continue to represent WBC at the panel meetings, but with greater feedback to and from other services. In particular, other services should have the opportunity to raise queries about clients who are receiving a support service from them but not from the FST.

5.2.2 Recommendations

We considered using this team as the core of an expanded housing-related support team which would co-ordinate all support for working age clients. On balance we felt that this did not bring sufficient advantages to justify such a change. Our recommendations for this team are therefore largely around creating a better understanding and appreciation amongst the wider staff group of what the team does, and greater information sharing.

5.3 Don't Lose Your Home or Business Project

The brief stated:

Within the housing needs team is a specialist project that supports those threatened with homelessness, primarily in the private sector, by liaising with mortgage providers to avoid repossessions, negotiating with debt management companies and providing tailored advice and assistance.

5.3.1 Our findings:

The Don't Lose Your Home (DLYH) officer is based in the housing needs team and works closely with other members of the team. Although the focus of the description above is on

mortgage repossessions, currently there is little demand for work in this area (although this may change if interest rates rise in the future). The focus of the work is on preventing landlord evictions in the private rented sector.

WBC performance on homelessness prevention is excellent. P1E numbers reflect a service which is under pressure yet is managing to prevent homelessness in a significant number of cases. The DLYH work is a key part of this, with 46 successful preventions in 2014/15. Other officers on the team spoke highly of the DLYH work and recognise its value. There was some concern that if the post were merged into a broader team or moved to another service area the focus on homelessness prevention might be lost.

5.3.2 Recommendations

This post is clearly doing work which is valued and valuable for WBC. The post should continue as it is and should continue to be based within the housing needs team. There is a potential overlap between the work of this officer and the welfare benefits officer, although there is a distinction as the latter focuses largely on council tenants. Any potential overlap can be resolved through greater data-sharing.

5.4 Sheltered Housing – Floating support service

The brief stated:

The Sheltered Housing Team has recently embarked on a 12 month floating support pilot service for older people currently living in the community. The long term vision is for the eight sheltered housing schemes in Waverley to become community hubs and support older people in the borough through a ‘hub and spoke’ model. The Floating Support Workers will support older people to access appropriate services, primarily through signposting rather than direct support, to enable them to maintain their independence.

5.4.1 Our findings

The Floating Support service is part-funded through Supporting People and will need to evidence that it is making savings for health and care services to attract long term funding. The current service is relatively new and there is little information as yet about its impact. 80 referrals have been made to the service in the past seven months. The service provides relatively short-term support: three to twelve months, but can refer on to other partners where there is a longer term support need. A range of partners also refer into the service, including adult social care, GP surgeries, day centres and community-based nurses.

The demography of WBC shows that there is likely to be significant demand for this type of floating support service. This was confirmed by partners who are keen to see the service established and expanded. Commissioners also spoke very positively about the scheme, there is a belief that it is having an impact even though there is little hard evidence to support this at present.

We also met with the scheme managers and other members of the sheltered housing team. The team has recently undergone a restructuring to deliver savings driven by cuts in Supporting People, with a view to making it entirely self-funding through an additional housing management charge.

There is good communication between the floating support officers and sheltered scheme managers, although the two services are run very separately at the moment. The aspiration to create a 'hub and spoke' model based around the eight sheltered/very sheltered housing schemes offers the opportunity to expand the floating support service, drawing on this wider capacity. This will need to be handled with care: some tenants may feel that the recent restructuring has already diluted the service, and it is important that they feel they are getting value for money. Nevertheless, the introduction of a 'hub and spoke' model which expands to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals living outside the schemes offers the opportunity to source a greater range of funding, and helps to future-proof the existing schemes.

In the workshop with the sheltered housing team, there was some discussion about the fact that sheltered housing no longer has such a distinctive identity, and there is a lack of understanding both from prospective tenants, and partners, about the role it plays. This can impact on demand, on the one hand, and give rise to very high expectations about the level of need which can be accommodated, on the other. The core work of the sheltered housing team is outside our remit but this discussion suggests that there may be a need to consider rebranding and raising the profile of the service. In terms of the expectations of partners, it may be helpful to think in terms of how these can be met, rather than managed. This may involve the schemes acting as a base for a wider range of health and care services, both for tenants and for those living in the surrounding community.

5.4.2 Recommendations

The floating support service, backed by the wider sheltered housing team, offers an opportunity to create a wider cross-tenure 'older persons housing service' dealing with everything from downsizing to adaptations to welfare benefits to social isolation. Such a service has the potential to attract those who are self-funding, as well as funding from Supporting People. There is also the potential to bring in funding from health if it can be demonstrated that services are leading to savings in this area. In particular, the Better Care Fund would invest in elements of the service if it can be evidenced that it is delivering savings for health and social care.

The Older Persons Housing Service would be made up of existing relevant WBC services. There is an option to bring in services from external partners, whether this is by expanding the team or creating a virtual delivery team which crosses organisational boundaries and some support from partners for this, but this will take much longer to deliver and should be seen as a later stage. The internal team could be established quite quickly, with consideration of external partners perhaps a year or two down the line.

5.5 Easy Move Project

The brief stated:

The Easy Move Project was set up in March 2013 to help older people downsize, by providing practical help to reduce anxiety and stress and financial assistance. The majority of the funding for the two year project comes from the Prevention, Personalisation and Partnership Fund (PPPF) from Adult Social Care. Initially, the project has supported Council tenants who are living in accommodation that is larger than they need and has delivered the added benefit of freeing up family homes for rent.

5.5.1 Our findings

The Easy Move Officer (EMO) carries a caseload of around 30 cases at any one time. 25 tenants have been supported to move. This is particularly impressive given that the officer works only three days a week on this service.

A number of landlords have similar projects, some of them set up in response to the bedroom tax and some to the increasing numbers of older people needing adaptations because the property they are in is unsuitable for them. This type of project is considered best practice nationally, and the WBC scheme appears to be a good example of this.

Referrals come from a number of different teams within WBC, and also from Adult Care Services and from Age UK. The EMO does not generally have information showing whether those on the scheme are also receiving support from elsewhere. A questionnaire is used before and after the move to evidence outcomes. This questionnaire could be expanded quite easily to provide greater evidence about the health benefits of the move, although this would also require additional follow-up at later stages.

It is clear that this post is needed, and is delivering valuable outcomes for WBC. Greater communication and information-sharing would help to ensure that the EMO is aware of wider support needs and able to access information held by other teams and refer on as appropriate.

The vast majority of clients are older people. There is also huge demand for this service in the private sector, and some potential clients would be prepared to pay for the service. Commissioners have also expressed some interest in funding a wider service, although this would be on a spot purchase basis rather than on-going funding.

5.5.2 Recommendation

Our recommendation is that this post is moved into the new older persons housing service, and that the remit is expanded over time to include other tenures. We are aware that capacity is limited and there is a need to prioritise WBC tenants at the moment. Logically, we would expect demand for the service from WBC tenants to fall over time – as many of those wanting to move will have done so, although new cases will also arise. This may offer an opportunity to expand the service across tenures. Funding could also be sought

for a pilot scheme with the aim of attracting self-funders – there was a positive response to this suggestion from relevant commissioners so it is certainly worth exploring.

5.6 Specialist housing options advice

The brief stated:

The housing options team provides advice and assistance to individuals and households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness or trying to find suitable accommodation in the borough to meet their housing needs. Many of the residents who approach the service are vulnerable and may require signposting or some ongoing assistance to help resolve their housing situation.

5.6.1 Our findings

As highlighted above, WBC's performance on homelessness prevention and homelessness is excellent. The team credit this in part to their ability to deal with a wide range of issues directly, without having to refer people on for support elsewhere, although the team does work with a wide range of other agencies.

Within the team is the specialist housing officer who deals primarily with domestic abuse cases. The team are keen to see this post focus retained and believe that a lot of their success in preventing homelessness for domestic abuse cases is down to the work of the officer. The officer works closely with the county wide service, and the boundaries between the teams appear to be clear. The county wide service does not have housing-related issues within its remit, but refers these to the housing needs team.

Some concern has been expressed by senior WBC officers at the low number of referrals from the housing needs team to the county wide service, giving rise to concern that there is potential duplication. We spoke to Chapter 1, the provider of the county wide service and they confirmed that they do not feel there is duplication. There is a good relationship between the two teams, with a lot of joint working and joint visits where needed. They recognise that the specialist advice post gives the housing options team access to greater expertise internally, and feel this is helpful in terms of ensuring that cases are dealt with quickly and effectively. They did confirm that both sides have put a lot of work in to establish this relationship, and perhaps historically the joint working was not as strong as it is today.

The specialist officer in the housing needs team is also working to ensure that all social landlords in the borough respond appropriately to domestic abuse cases, and to ensure that best use is made of available housing stock. Rather than being a point of concern, we feel that this post reflects best practice across the sector.

For the last decade, domestic abuse has featured in both local and national statistics as one of the top three causes of homelessness. It is interesting to note that both nationally and locally this has ceased to be the case in recent years. It is unlikely that rates of domestic abuse are reducing, but rather that the response now avoids making the

household homeless. This is certainly the case for WBC, which is using a wide range of approaches and tools to ensure that homelessness is prevented wherever possible.

5.6.2 Recommendation

Our recommendation is that this post is retained within the housing needs team in its current role. There is a need to ensure that appropriate information on support needs is shared with other services, and that appropriate referrals are made to other services when needed. This is more sensitive in domestic abuse cases but it is possible to make this work.

5.7 Welfare Benefits Officer

The brief stated:

To help tenants to reduce the impact of welfare reforms, the Council appointed a welfare benefits officer who sits within the rent accounts team. The role has a strong focus on assisting vulnerable or less able tenants ensure they have as much assistance as possible to meet all their financial demands, in particular rent and council tax. The work of the welfare benefits officer helps to ensure money from sources, such as Discretionary Housing Payments and charitable organisations are fully utilised to assist tenants.

5.7.1 Our findings

The welfare benefits officer (WBO) has dealt with 75 cases since October 2014, raising more than £28,000 in additional benefits for tenants. There is a clear referral process, with the majority of referrals coming from the rent accounts team. Referrals can also come from colleagues in Housing Benefit, and occasionally from other teams, such as tenancy and estates. The role is still evolving, with strengthening links to agencies such as DWP, Jobcentre Plus, HMIC, and Catalyt, who provide drug and alcohol services.

As with other services, there is a lack of communication and data-sharing. The WBO does have a greater knowledge of other services and refers people to them as appropriate. The WBO is conscious that her remit is a narrow one, and is focused on the core areas of her work, although she will also support people towards employment as part of this.

Many landlords have appointed similar posts as part of their response to welfare reform. Many social landlords are also experiencing a rise in arrears at the moment, but this is not the case for WBC. In the HouseMark report, total arrears as a percentage of rent due is shown as upper quartile, as are write-offs. We also reviewed more up to date performance information which confirms that WBC remains upper quartile for rent collection. WBC is therefore managing arrears well, and minimising the impact of welfare reform. However, there are still significant changes to come on welfare reform, and it would be unhelpful to reduce resources going in to this area of work.

5.7.2 Recommendation

Our recommendation for this post is to leave it as it is, with its current remit and location within the rent accounts team. The focus on council tenants would also be maintained. We considered the option of widening the scope of the role to include all tenures, but the DLYH officer focuses on other tenures, and widening the scope of the role without increasing resources would be unhelpful.

The two officers (WBO and DLYH) might benefit from working more closely, particularly in sharing knowledge of external partner services, and supporting each other to remain up to date as legislation changes. This does not require a structural change. As noted previously, the tenancy and estates team are not always aware when the WBO is working with a tenant and this also needs to be addressed. This is a systems issue, which is discussed in section 5.

6 Other options considered and rejected

Set out below are the other options which were considered and the reasons why they were rejected.

6.1 *No structural change, introduce one referral point, data-sharing*

This option would meet the need to have one single entry point into support services whilst minimising the impact on existing services. The one entry point could be virtual, through a shared system with different officers carrying out an initial assessment using shared and agreed criteria.

This option was not taken forward as we do not believe that a virtual team would work well across the wider range of services, and it also misses the opportunity to create a more flexible and forward looking service for older people.

6.2 *Bring together all services into one housing-related support team*

This option was not preferred because some existing services work closely with the teams in which they are embedded, and the benefits of this outweigh the advantage of bringing all support teams together. There is a risk of losing the focus on services for older people and the potential future development of these services.

6.3 *Create older persons housing service (as above) and bring together other posts into a new housing related support team*

Under this option, the older persons housing service would be formed as set out above. Services for those of working age (DLYH officer, specialist housing options advice, welfare benefits and potentially the family support team) would be brought together into a new housing-related support team. As with option one above, we felt that this risked losing the advantages of having some posts embedded in the teams they work most closely with.

6.4 As recommendations, but widen OPHS to include partners

Under this option, the older persons housing service would be expanded to include posts from partner organisations. These could be seconded in, or a virtual team could be formed. This is an option that we feel WBC could continue to explore but it is not deliverable in the short term. WBC needs to bring together existing services to establish the OPHS as a first stage, and perhaps consider broadening this to include some partner services as a second stage.

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