

BEST VALUE PHASE 2 REVIEW: OUT OF HOURS SERVICES

The following paper is an extract from the full draft report, and includes the following aspects only:

- **Application of the four concepts of Best Value**
- **Introduction to the review**
- **Core service descriptions**
- **Methodology of the review**

1.0 Application of the four concepts of Best Value

- 1.1 Best Value is underpinned by four concepts against which services should be evaluated. They are challenge, comparison, competition and consultation. How do the Out of Hours services measure against the four concepts?

Challenge

- 1.2 The Council has a statutory duty to provide social services, emergency housing repairs and homelessness services on a 24 hour basis. The Community Alarm Service (CAS) and Homecare Emergency Response Service enable the Council to fulfil its statutory obligations under Community Care legislation. Additionally, in providing a ‘clearing house’ function outside normal office hours for emergencies, the CAS supports other statutory requirements e.g. technical services and environmental health.

Comparison

- 1.3 Even basic information about similar services, in either local authorities or the private sector, has proved difficult to obtain. Hopefully this situation will improve when the implementation of Best Value becomes integral, and this information is regularly gathered on a national basis.
- 1.4 Where information has been collected, no thorough comparisons of service provision has been undertaken, due to lack of staff time available. Comparison of services on a cost basis only would be inconclusive and unfair, since the way such services operate are widely differing in volume and scope. Such comparison would also require detailed study of quality issues.

Competition

- 1.5 Several points in the 'Comparison' section above would apply equally to 'Competition'. In addition, both the unpredictable and fluctuating pattern of these types of service provision makes projections of costings, usage and resources difficult to quantify and project.

Consultation

- 1.6 The wide ranging nature of the services involved in this review, has meant that consultation with the general public as service users has been difficult to organise within the extremely tight timescale. It was not possible, for instance, to facilitate face-to-face interviews, therefore a mixture of telephone interviews and postal questionnaires to a sample of users was carried out.
- 1.7 Consultation with partner agencies and other service departments within the Council, who are also effectively service users of these Out of Hours services, was carried out by both postal questionnaire and using feedback from a multi-agency Reference Group meeting. Together these methods provided corroborative insight about the services under review.

2.0 Introduction to the Review and Core Service Descriptions

2.1 Terms of Reference:

This review covers those services operating between 5.00 p.m. to 9.00 a.m., at weekends and Bank Holidays, which the Council provides for people in distress who lack shelter and/or are at risk of physical or mental harm, or of harming others, and who are not able to fend for themselves.

2.2 The objectives of the Review were:

- to ensure that we know what the need is and why the service is being provided, bearing in mind the increase in government and public demands for 24 hour services across the board;
- to see if there are gaps in provision or overlaps;
- to see if services are value for money; and
- to propose improvements in effectiveness and efficiency, depending on the findings regarding the above.

2.3 Core services covered by the review are:

- Emergency Social Work team;
- Homelessness;

- Housing standby; emergency repairs;
- Homecare - emergency response service; and
- Community Alarm Service, including mobile warden service.

Core Service Descriptions

2.4 Brief descriptions of the five core services are as follows:

i) ***Community Alarm Service, including mobile wardens***

The Community Alarm Service (CAS) is part of the Council's Neighbourhood Services Directorate and provides a discretionary service to which all older people, people with disabilities and other vulnerable people can subscribe. The main purpose of the service is to provide customers with an easy to use and immediate means of obtaining assistance in an emergency. Customers are offered an alarm unit, together with a remote trigger or pendant. When the trigger is activated a call is automatically sent to the purpose-built Control Centre where the details of the call appear on a computer screen. The Control Centre Operator receives the call and takes appropriate action.

This action could be to:

- contact a Resident Warden if it is a sheltered scheme;
- contact a pre-determined person (family member or friend)
- despatch a Mobile Warden to assess the situation and provide the required assistance; or
- despatch an emergency service (fire, police, ambulance).

2.5 The service is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year, including Christmas Day.

2.6 The CAS provision covers both emergency and routine services. Out of Hours within this Best Value definition, is a time segment of the whole operation. This segment is not differentiated in services, resources or budgetary terms.

2.7 During the Out of Hours period the CAS also acts as a referral call base for emergencies arising out of hours in respect of housing repairs, homelessness, Homecare, emergency planning, technical services, environmental health, community language service, community properties and local meeting places; fire and intruder alarms; and staff safety monitoring.

The CAS estimates that 10% of the calls to the Centre overall are emergencies.

2.8 The CAS is contracted to support alarm systems for other agencies in Milton Keynes, e.g. Housing Associations and elsewhere e.g. Kingston Upon Thames. These contracts are

2.9 reviewed regularly.

ii) ***Emergency Housing Repairs***

2.10 The Council has a statutory duty to provide a 24 hour Emergency Housing Repairs service to our own tenants. Emergency work covers any repair needed to prevent danger to life or extensive damage to property, such as blocked drains and dangerous or exposed wiring. The aim is to complete emergency repairs within 4 hours of the problem being reported.

2.11 Out of Hours, i.e. from 5.00 p.m. to 9.00 am and at weekends and Bank holidays, the service is accessed via the Community Alarm Service; there is a separate telephone line at CAS (listed in the telephone directory), which enables Control Operators to differentiate these calls from other incoming calls. The CAS Control Operator will establish whether the problem requires an emergency repair and refer tenant details to the appropriate contractor for them to carry out the repair within the contract timescale. Where technical or other advice is needed, the Operator can contact an on-call Housing Officer for a decision on appropriate action.

iii) ***Emergency Social Work Team***

2.12 The Emergency Social Work team is a statutory service, and exists to ensure a professional response to genuine social work emergencies occurring outside office hours and requiring intervention before the next working day. In certain circumstances, social workers will occasionally carry out planned check visits on particular cases, pre-arranged with mainstream social care departments.

2.13 The service is available from 5.00 p.m. on Monday to Thursday and from 4.30 p.m. on Friday until 9.00 a.m. the next working day. Weekends and Bank Holidays are staffed 24 hours a day.

vi) ***Homecare - Emergency Response Service***

2.14 The Emergency Response service was established in June 1996 initially as a Joint Finance 3 year project. Following its success during this period, the service is now funded from the mainstream Homecare budget. The service is designed to respond to unplanned emergencies needing social care between the hours of 5.30 p.m. and 9.00 a.m., and 24 hours at weekends and Bank Holidays. It provides social care support from a dedicated team of Homecarers for older people and adults with physical problems. The service does not cater for young people or those with mental health problems.

2.15 The service is accessed via CAS who notify the Homecarers on call to enable prompt organisation of appropriate support. Key referring agencies are the Accident and Emergency department of MK Hospital as well as the CAS itself for people contacting them via their alarm installations.

v) ***Homelessness***

The out-of hours Housing Management / Homelessness service is a statutory service which aims to ensure that accommodation is available in emergencies, and to provide a Housing Officer to attend properties if entry is required for contractors or police.

2.16

Access to the service is through CAS, who hold details of the on-call Housing Management rota, who they will contact for advice and decisions on the action to be taken. The on-call manager will attend properties as necessary to resolve issues.

2.17

3.0 Methodology

3.1 **Activities undertaken to complete this review can be divided into five categories. They are:**

- formulating the terms of reference;
- establishing a core and a reference group;
- consultation with staff, users and partners;
- information gathering; and
- evaluating the evidence and writing the report.

Formulating the terms of reference and establishing groups

3.2 The Strategic Director of Learning and Development, together with the two officers, Policy and Inter-agency Liaison Manager and Policy Officer, project managing the review, prepared the terms of reference, which was distributed for comment, refined and agreed. These colleagues identified other key members of staff, both in-house and external, to establish the core and reference groups respectively. Membership of both groups (see Annex) increased as the scale of the remit emerged. The reference group met twice, initially as part of the consultation exercise, and secondly to comment upon the draft report

Consultation with staff, users and partners

3.3 The two project managers spent several hours in the CAS and the ESWT premises during out of hours, learning about the services and asking questions. They also made subsequent visits to discuss information gathering with staff, followed by a number of telephone calls.

3.4 Pro-formas for the collection of evidence were distributed to each of the core services, with varying levels of response from positive, full, helpful at one end of the continuum to inadequate or basic at the other. In areas such as housing repairs and homelessness lack of monitoring information requested was a key deficit, as the details requested are not systematically gathered as part of day-to-day service performance monitoring.

3.5 Questionnaires (see Annex ?) were distributed to appropriate Council staff and external partners, seeking their views on various aspects of the Out of Hours services.

3.6 The two project managers gave a brief presentation to the Borough Wide Housing Board meeting in November 1999 and requested each representative there to persuade five local people from their communities to complete the questionnaire. Unfortunately there were no responses to this request, and there has not been time to follow them up individually.

3.7 A sample of ESWT users, who had been in recent contact with the service, were contacted and telephone interviews conducted by one of the project managers. Questionnaires were also completed by some members of the Milton Keynes Foster Care Association who had individual experience of support from ESWT.

3.8 At the first meeting of the Reference Group, appropriate Council officers and external partners were asked to share their views on what was good about the services, what was poor and to complete a wish list for each component known to them. The results of these consultation exercises are shown in Section 3 below.

Information Gathering

3.9 In order to compare the Council core services with other authorities and the private sector, officers approached the SSI, LGIU, CIPFA and the Community Alarms Association. Telephone calls were made to neighbouring authorities to seek publicity materials. Most of the approaches resulted in very little hard evidence. Again some external and in-house colleagues were very helpful, despite being under extreme work pressures, others were difficult to engage or impolite in their responses. Two external authorities refused to send information because the officer approaching did not live in the area.

Some documents provided by officers as part of their portfolios of evidence were extremely useful e.g. the Financial Review of the CAS. It is interesting to note that this document, on finances alone, took an accountant forty days to complete.

3.10 The arrival in October 1999 of national research, the 'Open All Hours' report carried out by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), was extremely informative and illuminating.

3.11 Unfortunately the timescale prescribed for completion of these Best Value pilots necessitated commencement of this review prior to receipt of the report. It would, in retrospect, have simplified the process for this particular review, had the SSI report, which highlighted key areas for investigation, been available at the start of the review. It is interesting to note that the SSI report, which researched one aspect of Out of Hours service,

the ESWT, in eight authorities was carried out by twenty five specialist staff.

The varying scope, range and complexity of networking by the core services with external partners made this Best Value review an extremely difficult task. It became five Best Value reviews rolled into one, and perhaps not doing justice to the services. However, lessons have been learned that are developed into a set of comments and suggestions.

- 3.12 The short timescale available, and limited staff resources, has meant that the focus of the review centres on the CAS and ESWT. In some ways this is appropriate as one (ESWT) is a major element within the terms of reference, and the other (CAS) both undertakes its own, and co-ordinates the Out of Hours work for the other core services included. It was hard to isolate the Out of Hours element of some of these services, notably CAS which operates on a 24 hour basis. It seemed unreasonable to request them to take on a major activity to
- 3.13 break down all the Out of Hours elements of their services, e.g. finances.

- 3.14 Finally, due to the time and staff resource constraints identified above, it is fair to record that a significant amount of this Best Value review has had to be done out of hours, in officers' own personal time.