

Best Value Review : Out of Hours Services : December 1999

Summary and Recommendations

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

Challenge

The Council has a statutory duty to provide emergency social services, housing repairs and homelessness services on a 24 hour basis. The Community Alarm Service and Homecare 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 Community Alarm Service supports other statutory requirements e.g. technical services, environmental health.

Comparison

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 information regularly gathered on a national basis.

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

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

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 small sample of users was carried out.

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.

Recommendations Relating to Issues Arising from the Review

Item No. **Section**

4.1 Identification of need for Out of Hours Services for the Vulnerable Groups

The Community Alarm Service is requested to identify its optimum level of operation to determine:

- a) future levels of growth against known population trends;
- b) the need for priority criteria; and
- c) resourcing implications for preferred levels of service. (4.1.3)

4.2 Equalities

In adherence to the Council's Equality Audit it is recommended that:

- a) computer records on service users' ethnic origin are used as part of performance monitoring portfolios and discussed in team meetings;
- b) action is taken to ensure that tenants' ethnicity details are recorded on the First Housing system and are then utilised in the monitoring of repair call outs both during the daytime and out of hour; and
- c) further work is required to ensure that public information regarding the Emergency Social Work Team, etc. is available in a variety of formats and languages. (4.2.9)

4.3 Service Information for the Public and Partners

- a) that all leaflets are reviewed and updated to ensure that details of the full range of related Out of Hours services are included;
- b) that the Emergency Social Work Team and Housing Maintenance leaflets are amended;
- c) that wider distribution of leaflets is pursued to ensure public and other agency awareness of the services available;
- d) that the listing in the 'Messenger' as well as telephone directory entries are amended to clarify that the emergency numbers listed are only for use out of hours;
- e) that partners are regularly updated on existing and developing services in order to improve service users access to appropriate services; and
- f) that users and representative groups, as required by the Disability Discrimination Act, are consulted on effective means of communication, where this is not yet undertaken. (4.3.14)

4.4 Access

- a) that consideration be given to whether Emergency Social Work Team telephone lines should be diverted to Community Alarm Service where callers will speak to an actual person, when social workers are unavailable. It should be noted that this could have potential training implications for Control Operators;
- b) more consistent contact with Social workers by the Emergency Social Work Team could be maintained if they were equipped with bleeps that allow contact in all establishments. Technical advice would be needed on the best telephone management systems;
- c) that the Emergency Social Work Team ansaphone message is altered (when appropriate) to indicate that a social worker is available but on another line;
- d) that procedures regarding use of mobile telephones and diversion of calls should be properly defined and monitored to ensure consistency. It has been suggested that the Service Manager and Team Manager carry out quality control by doing a sample of response to calls; and
- e) in the longer term, organisation of access to Out of Hours services could be explored in the context of an overall Call Centre review. (4.4.6)

4.5 Exchange of Information about Service Users: internally and with partners

- a) that out of hours IT back-up to all Out Of Hours services is considered by the Resources Directorate, which would most likely need to be on an on-call basis;
- b) that IT ensure that the new CareFirst system has the means for Emergency Social Work Team to access mainstream user files on a read only basis and in the interim provide Emergency Social Work Team with such access via shared IT drives; and
- c) that Community Alarm Service and Homecare are also given access to CareFirst database system on a read only basis, but that levels of access are safeguarded to ensure that client confidentiality is maintained. (4.5.6)

4.7 Scope of Service

- a) that consideration be given to the feasibility of Emergency Social Work Team providing the foster carer support service using funding from Quality Protects Management Action Plan; and
- b) that consideration be given to encompassing the Homeless on-call arrangements within the workload of the Emergency Social Work Team. (4.7.11)
- c) that consideration be given to increasing the range of service users able to access the Homecare Emergency Response Service. (4.7.12)

4.8 Policies and Protocols

- a) that protocols between internal departments should be developed as a priority, which should include the following areas:
 - define roles and responsibilities;
 - establish the boundaries for action e.g. eligibility criteria including priorities and exclusions;
 - establish which situations should be referred on for decision;
 - establish procedures for implementing action;
 - define recording practice and information sharing; and
 - define what performance monitoring information should be collected, in what format and how it should be passed on, including frequency.
- b) that protocols be developed with external partners, on similar lines to those identified in (a). (4.8.7)

4.9 Monitoring and Evaluation

In a number of authorities social workers are on duty until midnight, after which on-call arrangements via a call centre apply. More intensive analysis of the pattern of calls post midnight, and the type and level of interventions required, is necessary to assess the potential impact of such a change in working patterns. Monitoring figures are not currently available to this level of detail, therefore this aspect has not been investigated within this review.

Additionally a detailed financial analysis of the differential costs, in comparison to current expenditure, would need to be carried out, to ascertain any potential savings, taking into account on-call payments and projected overtime costs.

It is therefore recommended that :

- a) more detailed analysis of post midnight Emergency Social Work Team call patterns is carried out over time;
- b) that the financial benefits of a change in working patterns are evaluated; and
- c) that further action be considered in the light of these findings. (4.9.11)

In relation to the other services under review it is recommended:

- d) that new forms are developed which will enable adequate monitoring of repairs calls received and service provided to tenants, and facilitate monitoring of contract compliance; and
- e) That Housing Repairs and Homelessness Services are prioritised for full scale reviews in the 5 year Best Value Performance Plan. (4.9.23)

4.13 Health and Safety Issues

To safeguard staff, and comply with the Council's Health and Safety recommendations, it is recommended that a Community Alarm Service pendant alarm is installed at the Emergency Social Work Team base. (4.13.8)

4.14 Staff Training

- a) That induction of Community Alarm Service staff should also include time spent with staff from the services they support, e.g. Housing Repairs; and
- b) that specific training is provided to control operators in the use of the First Housing system. (4.14.2)

4.15 Finances

- a) that consideration by the Community Alarm Service of the advantages and disadvantages of increased fees for mobile wardens is explored. (4.15.13)
- b) that the Community Alarm Service keeps its fees to Housing Associations under review to ensure that charges raised are sufficient to cover any potential additional costs incurred. (4.15.16)
- c) that Community Alarm Service ascertains the cost level which the market will stand for its range of services. (4.15.16)
- d) that the current position is updated with regard to accurate re-charge of expenditure for Community Alarm Service services between the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account. (4.15.20)
- e) that accurate costings for the Community Alarm services provided to other Council departments are determined during 2000/1 and recharged to the appropriate budget headings, in accordance with CIPFA guidelines, in the following financial year; (14.15.29) and
- f) that, accordingly, the necessary adjustments are made to the base budgets of the departments affected, in the next financial year i.e. 2001/2. (14.15.29)

4.16 Strategic Framework

It is recommended that consideration of an inclusive Council and partner Out of Hours strategic framework be explored, covering such elements as:

- eligibility criteria;
- roles and responsibilities;
- definitions;
- staff guidelines; and
- networking mechanisms (4.16.5).