

Shelter

London Borough of
Southwark
2018

Report of Findings

Shelter Consultancy Services

Introduction

Shelter's Consultancy Service was asked by to carry out a telephone-based mystery shopping and face to face exercise for LB Southwark to assess the standard with which initial contact by people with a housing problem is handled.

The consultancy exercise is to provide a robust, independent challenge to identify areas of strength and areas where improvements may be made.

Method

A total of 20 telephone and 8 face to face contacts were attempted over a period from July – August 2018. A range of typical advice scenarios with varying levels of advice needs were used. Three scenarios were repeated to assess the service's ability to identify repeat customers or where same advice situation would lead to a different result/outcome. All scenarios were tailored with local information for authenticity.

Each telephone mystery shopper was asked to call the Housing Solutions Service Housing Advice line number and then rate their experience against a number of assessment criteria. Face to face visit took place at Bournemouth Road.

The scope of the mystery shopping is limited to the first point of contact by telephone and face to face contact to evaluate a potential customer's experience leading up to and including triage or pre-assessment.

To meet Government's Hcllc data monitoring requirements the authority now routinely asks customers for personal details including national insurance number to complete registration of an enquiry. Officers ask for key documents at the earliest opportunity to enable a detailed assessment later. As mystery shoppers were not able to use authentic national insurance numbers or documents this meant the enquiry was limited to the triage stage.

This mystery shopping was not intended to evaluate the interview assessment stage or the approach of the authority in completing Personalised Housing Plans. A more extensive mystery shop would need to be designed ideally using genuine service users to assess the quality of advice and support offered at that stage of the service.

Scoring

The ratings and results of the mystery shops are used to determine the performance in each quality standard on a Red, Amber, Green (RAG) basis, according to a five-point performance scale:

Excellent: 85% - 100%
Very Good 75%- 84%
Good: 65% - 74%
Fair: 46% - 64%
Poor: 26% - 45%
Failing: 0% - 25%

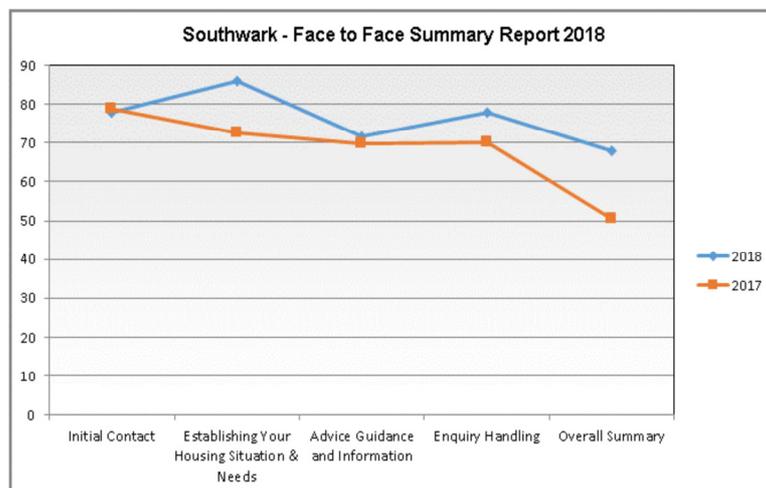
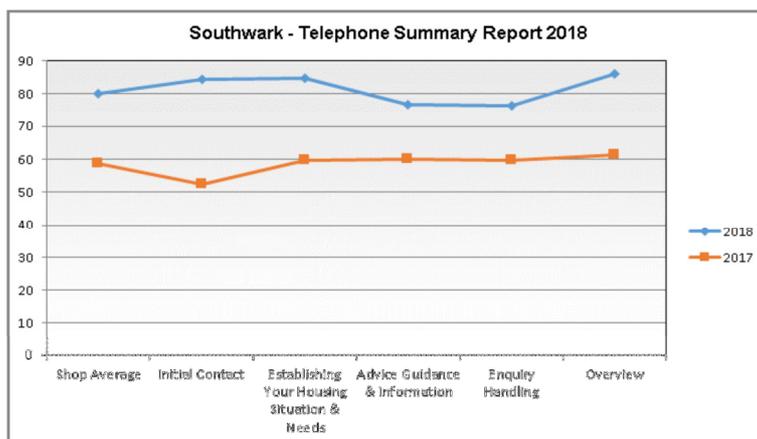
The ratings have been adjusted this year to enable mystery shoppers to use the above five-point scale to reflect their experience more accurately.

This report is a summary of the themes and key findings. Any references to 'customer' or 'customers' in all cases is a mystery shopper rather than a genuine customer contact. The portal and log in details for our mystery shopping are available on:

Link: <http://shelter.jksmysteryshopping.co.uk>

Handling of Initial Contact: Results and Analysis

Activity Area	Your performance 2013		Your Performance 2017		Your Performance 2018	
	%	Rating	%	Rating		
Telephone Contact	40	Fair	71	Good	80%	Very Good
Face to Face Contact	31	Poor	64	Good	74%	Very Good
Overall Score	35	Poor	67	Good	77%	Very Good



Summary

A review of LB Southwark's approach to the Handling of Initial Contact has resulted in a rating of Very Good. A number of assessment areas achieved Excellent and others improved to higher level of Good where they previously were at a lower end of the rating scale. **A performance score of 80 % for telephone advice and 74% for face to face services has been achieved in this mystery shopping.**

This score demonstrates that changes introduced by the authority since the mystery shopping was completed 2017 have mostly been effective. Access to services has been a key area of improvement with a majority of shoppers reporting that they were able to speak to an officer at first point of contact. A much more customer friendly service is now in place and constructive changes are embedded to offer an early prevention approach.

An Excellent score of 85% was achieved for 'Establishing the customer needs' during the calls and face to face. The mystery shopping exercise found that advisers/officers engaged positively with potential customers to gather key information about their circumstances and provide some basic advice and information.

Officers are mindful in their approach to explain the offer of support available in light of the Homelessness Reduction Act changes – the need to take as much information from the customer, registering their details, offering a clear outline of next steps and explaining what the authority will do to assist is a core part of the service approach now, especially in relation to telephone advice.

The results for the telephone mystery shops offer a clear indication that staff know what is expected of them and the service the customer should be offered. Therefore, consistency in the quality and level of service offered has improved.

The face to face mystery shops highlight a similar improved approach to establishing customers' needs, providing details of the help the authority can provide and next steps for customers. However, there were some mixed approaches so some shoppers were advised to return on another day or their contact details were taken for follow up. The reception staff are also mindful in ensuring customers understand that the authority can help and take time to explain the information the customer will need to provide (documents etc) but the approach to next steps is less clear or consistent.

Where shoppers presented as imminently homeless, advice was available via the Shelter advice unit. Other shoppers were informed about triage/pre-assessment at a future date for less urgent cases and advice was offered on the information required and that casework help would be offered (mystery shoppers were instructed not to accept/agree to appointments).

There were a few situations where officers did not provide the enhanced level of information that would have been appropriate. Some areas for improvement are mentioned in the report below and this change can be achieved through some internal staff awareness via team meetings, and building on existing systems in place.

Understanding what matters to customers when they present with a housing/homelessness problem can help Officers take a much more informed approach to identifying the correct support and help

them to prioritise issues. Our mystery shopping involved scenarios situation where there were underlying health or money issues and recognising how these impact customers' ability to manage their housing problem can play key role in the service that the authority offers. To progress further in the design and delivery of a customer focussed service, we include some recommendations for the authority which will help understand customers need and consider an approach that is much more tailored.

Key Messages

Telephone Mystery Shopping

Initial Contact - Access

In 2017 several callers experienced problems in accessing the telephone service as they were not able to get through to speak to an appropriate adviser. This impacted the scores resulting in a rating of 53%. In the 2018 mystery shop, the team have achieved an Excellent rating of 87% - 17 shoppers reported access was Very Easy or Easy and they were able to speak to a member of the Housing Solutions team with knowledge about what support is available and able to give some initial advice where appropriate.

This is a very good result and shows that the authority has worked on improvements to achieve early prevention of homelessness for customers who contact by telephone for advice.

Mystery shoppers comments on ease of access included:

- *When I called the enquiry was dealt with the first advisor and I wasn't passed on to anybody else. The staff member seemed to want to help from the very start and asked questions in order to better understand my situation.*
- *I spoke to somebody who could give me guidance straight away and wasn't transferred on to a second person.*
- *My call was answered within 3 rings by a staff member who fully resolved my query.*
- *The first call I made was not answered so I called back. On the second call I spoke to a lady called [Officer].. She allowed me to explain my situation and she let me know a lot of valuable information going forward with my situation*

Shoppers who reported less positive ratings had difficulty in getting through (rang more than once to speak to someone) or did not get advice about their housing problem. One shopper reported: *I had to phone 6 times before anyone would take my call. When I did eventually get through, my call was dealt with the first point of contact.*

One reported that it took seven attempts (over a few days) and another shopper spoke to an officer from the housing solutions team who attempted to transfer the call to the Housing Benefit department but did not identify that the shopper had significant rent arrears and offered no advice or assistance on the presenting housing problem:

Scenario used: You are asking for housing advice concerning benefits. You were receiving full benefits but then your partner found a job. You have put in a claim, but it has not been processed. Your son has been ill, and you have just not had time to chase it. Your landlord is running out of

patience and is asking for the rent. How do you stop him evicting you and what help and advice can they give you? You have rent arrears of £1800

A second shopper also with housing benefit causing rent arrears was transferred to the housing benefit department but was not successfully put through to someone. Again, no advice was offered on the advice and assistance that would be available to help prevent them from losing their housing/ accommodation due to the rent arrears: *"I was not provided any information. I was advised that the staff member would connect my call to the Housing Benefit team but the call was ended by the automated call programme before my transferred call was answered."*

Establishing your Needs

The service has new systems and processes in place to ensure that they establish a good level of understanding of the potential customers situation when they contact so that the enquiry/case can be properly registered.

In 2017 this area achieved a rating of 73% and this has increased to 85%, another Excellent rating. The approach taken during each call was slightly different but officers clearly attempt to adapt to the caller and the situation being presented. As part of the core service, customers who by telephone are now seen as an opportunity to understand the caller's needs and explain how the authority can help, as well explain the information the caller would need to provide to get the necessary help.

A number of shoppers were encouraged to explain their situation and they advised the shopper that this information would be shared with a caseworker for the pre-assessment to take place more effectively. There is an emphasis on offering a seamless service and that information is shared for the customer's benefit. The call handling reports indicate that the authority has established a framework for understanding housing need and gathering information so that a potential customer does not need to repeat their circumstances should they present in person or by telephone again

15 calls were rated 85% or above for this area and the reports written by the shoppers indicate advisers were attentive and professional during the calls.

Housing officers are now routinely asking questions to understand whether a potential customer is working and has a regular income or in receipt of benefits, and a few officers checked whether the potential customer had any mental health or physical needs.

Some shoppers indicated that they are struggling with health issues or stress and some officers did not probe further or acknowledge this. Whilst officers are not expected to evaluate a caller's health/stress it is important that this is acknowledged, and potential customers should be advised that any medical evidence, details of support etc will be relevant to their assessment.

Some positive comments from the shoppers to support their reports:

- *The Housing Solutions Officer asked me about asked what my situation was and continued asking questions while giving advice to establish my needs.*

- *I was asked about why I needed assistance and my situation. I was able to tell the advisor what my needs were. I explained my situation and the staff member seemed to want to help me as much as she could from the start.*
- *The advisor asked what my situation was and she then told me step by step what I had to do in order to get help.*
- *I was given a good amount of time to explain my situation and was asked about where I was residing, where I was living before, if my Brother had given me notice, if I had a private tenancy previously, if I moved in to my Brothers house after the private tenancy had ended and they confirmed that I needed to use a mobility scooter. I was told that they have a new scheme called the Homeless Plan 2017 and that I would be able to approach the Southwark centre to fill in an application regarding this scheme if I saw it as the route I'd like to go down*
- *The staff member asked plenty of questions to assess my needs including my children's ages and names, my name and date of birth, my marital status, my current address, any history of violence, my nationality and my phone number.*

A recommended good practice is to ask what help a potential customer would like or what matters to them. This will allow the officer to manage any expectations early on and importantly establish whether the potential customer has or had any other advice/support (this will be relevant to any assessment later in relation to support needs).

Advice Information & Guidance

This assessment area achieved a rating of 77%. In the 2017 mystery shop the service showed improvement as Officers were offering basic advice on a range of housing/homelessness options and some officers provided details of other services/support available to customers. However, lower ratings were given when officers failed to provide advice or information based on an established understanding of a customer's housing need.

A different approach is evident now and many officers took time to explain that the authority would be focussing on helping the potential customer to prevent their homelessness and that they would be seen in person for a pre-assessment to determine the best solution. Officers were overall encouraging to shoppers that the authority would offer advice and assistance as part of ongoing casework. Help in finding alternative accommodation would be available. Proactive advice and steps were given to shoppers who said they were being asked to leave imminently from existing accommodation.

Only one officer explained the need to claim Universal credit/benefits and where shoppers presented with rent arrears in two scenarios they were referred to the Housing Benefit department but did not receive any housing advice to help them keep their home. This is an area the authority may wish to review to ensure there are referral arrangements in place with the Housing Benefit team and ensure Officers understand that a case involving rent arrears should also have been pre-assessed or passed to a caseworker.

A remaining area for improvement is that officers should recommend the authority's website or other online resources for information. A few face to face shoppers reported they were given a

Booklet with further information about the Housing Solutions service and other local services at the triage stage but this information is not available for customers who contact by telephone.

Call Handling and overall summary

This assessment area achieved a very good score of 86% (Excellent); this was 74% in 2017. Some of the excellent call handling skills identified in previous mystery shops continue to be in place and are enhanced by encouraging customers to attend for a face to face pre-assessment/triage. This approach led most shoppers to feel Very confident/Confident about the help they would receive from the authority if they contacted again.

Comments from shoppers included:

- *The staff member was knowledgeable and courteous. She gave ample advice and was helpful throughout the conversation, providing me with a lot of advice and information on what to do in my circumstance, as well as what could be done to help me further.*
- *I did feel that the adviser took my situation seriously and progressed it as efficiently as possible, arranging a call back from a housing adviser at the earliest opportunity.*
- *The staff member was very knowledgeable and gave me good advice and assistance. I would be very comfortable talking to this person again if I were in that situation.*
- *The staff member was very friendly and helpful. She listened to me well and asked many questions. She told me their office address and asked me to come on Monday for assessment. She informed me what accommodation types are available including council houses and special departments in council houses. I am fully satisfied with the service received today.*

Face to Face Visits

As with the telephone mystery shops there has been improvement from 2017 in the handling of initial contact for housing and homelessness advice by face to face services. This area was assessed at 74% (Very Good).

Initial Contact - Access

This assessment area achieved a score of 78% (Very Good) with mystery shoppers reporting that they managed to speak to someone about their housing situation when they approached the service face to face. All shoppers reported they were greeted by a security staff member who checked if they had an appointment and helped them get a ticket. They then spoke to receptionist staff who were friendly approachable and professional. They were asked questions to determine if they are asking for housing advice/help

No shopper reported having to wait longer than 20 minutes and a number said they were seen very quickly after speaking to the receptionist. Two shoppers who presented with imminent homelessness situations were informed about the Shelter advice service available onsite.

One shopper was advised to approach another neighbouring local authority as he had returned to the area after a relationship breakdown. This potential customer should have been put forward for pre-assessment/triage as his scenario involved a local connection with family and friends in the Southwark area. Another shopper was given some basic advice by the receptionist after checking that they are not homeless that day and asked them to return as it was near closing time - the shopper was reassured that they would be assisted by the Council if they returned the next day.

The findings indicate the Officers at the front desk play a key role in determining whether a customer is forwarded for pre-assessment, referred to the Shelter Advice team or to another external service and that the response from the receptionist staff can differ. Not all shoppers were given the Southwark Home Search Booklet.

We recommend clear guidelines and regular monitoring of receptionist staff to ensure customers are allocated for pre-assessment or appointments appropriately so that opportunities for early prevention are not missed. As noted below many face to face shoppers reported a positive experience and left with a reasonable level of advice and information to encourage them to return or take next steps but it is important that customers who present with a housing need are properly pre-assessed to ensure underlying causes of threatened homelessness are identified and advice provided in more detail.

Establishing your Needs

This assessment area scored Excellent rating of 86% with most shoppers reporting that the officer they spoke to including reception staff took time to listen to their presenting housing problem.

In a scenario where a landlord was threatening eviction for rent arrears, the shopper reported:

The staff member was very good at communicating with me. She was attentive and listened carefully to my case before answering questions which were relevant to my case. She spoke clearly and coherently. She explained the next steps in detail, by informing me that once she received the supporting documentation she would contact the landlord and go through a process to ensure that my rights as a tenant were upheld. She explained that the landlord appeared to be acting unfairly, but she was also very patient and pleasant throughout. She explained that I could be seen on the same day and she would be able to assist me directly if I could return with the required documentation on the same day.

In another scenario relating to property with disrepair issues and tenant had health issues, the shopper said: *He was friendly and polite and asked how he could help. I explained my scenario and he asked for my name, which he entered into the system. He explained he would refer me to a team who handle private landlord enquiries. He explained the help that would be available and next steps.*

A shopper seeking advice after fleeing violence from a member of her family reported:

The member of staff asked questions to help understand my situation. She queried my current situation, who I lived with, how many dependents I had and their ages, how long I had resided in the apartment, whether it was located in

Southwark, whether I had proof of address and proof that I was asked to leave. She also queried the benefits I received and the reasons for not going back to Exeter. She was patient and listened carefully to my answers before asking the next questions.

Another shopper who had been sofa surfing with alcohol and substance misuse issues reported:

I was listened to carefully and without interruption and I was allowed as long as I needed, it was up to me to end the interaction. I was asked questions about my general homeless situation and further questions about my circumstances.

During this stage, officers routinely ask for any relevant documentation and explain why it is needed. Mystery shoppers were not presenting with documentation and in some scenarios were advised that a caseworker would contact them to arrange an appointment or that they return with relevant documents.

Advice Information and Guidance

This assessment area was rated at 72% (Good). Officers at the first point of contact for face to face services are routinely offering good information and advice to ensure potential customers understand their rights and the help the authority can offer.

The shopper seeking advice about her Landlord's rent increase demand reported:

I did not receive very detailed advice. I think this was because I did not have my documentation and she had said she would go through the legal rights and processes when I came back with my documents.

During our session, she had raised questions not covered by the scenario and asked how much rent I had owned. I informed her a month and told her I had fallen behind because I had not worked for a few weeks. She asked if arrears had happened before and I said "no". She then explained that the landlord should not have terminated the tenancy on this basis. She explained the arrears would not have been significant enough and asked for his details to contact him directly. She advised me that because I had been a tenant for 2 years and the arrears were no excessive I had section 21 rights as a tenant not to be evicted. The landlord should go through a set of processes before eviction. She did not specify any more details but informed me that I should report directly back to her when I returned with the necessary documentation to start the case.

She was very helpful throughout and showed great knowledge about the process. She provided advice with confidence. She also asked whether and what benefits I received and also explained my tenancy rights and reassured me that the shelter team would assist me in working with the landlord and also help with my accommodation. She also made me aware of legal rights that I might have. She was considerate and kindly ask that I retrieve a list of documents which she wrote down; Address details, Passport, tenancy agreement, proof of benefits, proof of notice and that I should return as soon as possible. She explained that they would then call the landlord and ensure that I received the help that I needed.

The shopper who contacted for advice about disrepair and a difficult Landlord reported:

I felt the staff member was quite knowledgeable and explained the services that were available clearly. He explained that the private LL team will be able to advice on my options and in particular what action I can take to resolve the issue with my LL I was told that I would be asked to provide more documents as this would help them to consider what other support I would need. He repeated that the team officer will explain this.

The shopper with a Landlord demanding an increase in rent reported:

I was asked if I received benefits and informed about the process to handle private tenancy homelessness. The staff member was knowledgeable and explained in a clear and concise way. I was informed about a specific team who handled my specific type of case. She provided their contact details as well as an information booklet. She advised that I follow up with the contact details and must not leave the property as the Council is able to advise if they see a copy of the notice. They will help me keep my accommodation if that is possible or help find another if that becomes necessary.

However, there are examples where the Officer did not tailor the advice/information, or limited advice and information on next steps was given, for example a scenario relating to a very difficult relationship breakdown the shopper reported:

I felt [the officer's] response was quite generic and not specific to my circumstances. So his advice was very much about getting the right documents so that the Council can assist me - proof of who's [name is on the tenancy], income, work, child id. He stated that if I was unable to return to the address to get the required documents it may be difficult for them to assist me. He did however direct me the citizens advice bureau and gave me their contact number

The shopper who presented as threatened as homeless after a family relationship breakdown reported:

I was advised that I would be contacted by telephone and an appointment would be made. The Case worker would then explain the benefits which I am entitled to, as well as organisations that would be able to help with my situation. I was given a document to complete ahead of the appointment.

The shopper with drug and substance misuse issues, and sofa surfing:

The member of staff wrote down details where I can go to for drinking and drugs problems, but did not tell me about benefits to help me with my money problem. I got information about being assessed for temporary accommodation. I was not offered an appointment there and then, but told I have to produce certain information about my homelessness. These include a letter from my friend who had been putting me up, my bank statement, and my passport or birth certificate. I was given the phone number for the community group that gives advice on drug and alcohol problems. And at the end I was given the book about the Southwark Homeless Centre to take away.

The service offered by the Officers is impacted by the lack of documentation from the shoppers however there is clearly an inconsistent approach depending on the Officer in relation to the level of advice and information offered as well next steps.

Under s179 HRA 2018 there is a duty to offer advice and assistance at the earliest opportunity and the approach taken by some officers in a few scenarios indicate that there is still scope for further improvement. There is also a need to ensure that information is provided routinely about other resources such as Shelter, CAB or the website. Some shoppers were offered a Booklet or a form to complete, only some were offered a follow up call from a caseworker.

Potential customers are also advised to come back if they approach the service near to closing hours, if not actually homeless on the same day.

The Housing Solutions Team may benefit from an internal review with front line staff about when customers are offered a pre-assessment/triage appointment, a follow up call from a caseworker, a referral to the Shelter Advice team (onsite), etc. The scenarios used in this mystery shop were a range of threatened homelessness situations and in each case there was a different response not necessarily tailored to the potential customer's request or needs. It would appear the response is driven by staff capacity/availability on the day.

Enquiry Handling and Overall Summary

Overall enquiry handling was positive with a rating of 68% as face to face shoppers reported a friendlier and customer focussed service upon arrival. Most shoppers said they were Very Confident or Confident that they would get the help they needed, provided they presented with the documents and information needed to assess their housing situation.

The score for this area is lower than other assessment areas as most shoppers rated the environment and facilities as Average and as one shopper commented they could clearly hear personal details of other families and individuals presenting with housing issues due to the lack of private interview space.

Additional recommendations

The HRA changes introduce a statutory framework which means that the authority is heavily focused on systems and processes to manage homelessness and housing enquiries. To consider how the authority can build on the changes that are embedded and offer an enhanced and tailored service we recommend a project involving:

1. A service user led evaluation or mystery shop to understand the customer journey beyond pre-assessment to check the quality of advice and next actions
2. Observations of front desk/reception through to assessment interviews to identify 'what matters' to service users when they present with a housing/homelessness issues.
3. Data and case analysis map the customer journey of approx. 20 cases including any other agencies involved or internal teams (housing benefit, social services)

Using this data identify the package of help/support that would benefit the customer to achieve longer term outcomes and prevent the repeat cycle of need. Further details of the scope and outcomes of a tailored service project can be discussed with the authority.

Conclusion

LB Southwark has made significant improvement in the Handling of Initial contact and the Housing Solutions Advice team should be pleased with their result. With a focus on customer needs the Service aims to deliver accessible housing advice and prevention support, therefore embedding HRA changes at a time when many authorities In England are still trying to learn and adapt to new systems and processes.