

Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED: All Wards

Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny

4th May 2003

Mystery Shopping of Advice Services

Report of the Corporate Director for Regeneration & Culture

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide members with background information to the mystery shopping of funded advice agencies conducted in Autumn 2003.

2 Summary

- 2.1 A recommendation to conduct mystery shopping of advice services was made by Best Value Inspectors in July 2001. The inspection report made specific reference to the Best Value Improvement Plan's intention to "develop a single set of quality assurance standards and instigation of mystery shopper exercises for all services" as a factor in the judgment that advice services were probably going to improve.
- 2.2 The Council's Advice Strategy (Cabinet – 25th February 2002) included the adoption of a charter for advice services that set out expected levels of customer service for all funded agencies and directly delivered services.
- 2.3 In February 2003 a further report on progress towards the objectives of the Advice Strategy was presented to the Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. This highlighted the intention to conduct a mystery shopping exercise to test performance against the Advice Services Charter.
- 2.4 In April 2003, the requirement for agencies to comply with the charter was built into service specifications with voluntary sector advice agencies. Also made explicit in the service specifications was the Council's intention to publish the results of the mystery shopping exercise.
- 2.5 In June 2003, the Council's intention to mystery shop advice agencies was discussed within the Community Legal Service Partnership for Leicester and it was agreed that the exercise should include a test of referral arrangements. The mystery shopping exercise was then built into the partnership's activity plan and approved by the partnership.
- 2.6 The Community Legal Service Partnership Steering Group that approved the action plan contains representatives from the voluntary sector advice agencies.
- 2.7 The contract for the mystery shopping exercise was tendered out to independent consultants with specialism in this area in order to ensure that an independent view of performance of agencies was obtained. A budget of £6,500 was allocated for this contract.
- 2.8 Following a tender exercise, conducted in line with the Council's financial regulations, MEL consultants Ltd were selected to undertake the work at a cost of £6445 excl. VAT. The consultants were chosen as a result of their significant

experience in engaging with community based organisations in Leicester in recent years, and the fact that they had a retained team of social research interviewers to do the work.

- 2.9 Advice Agencies were alerted to the start of the mystery shopping exercise by letter dated 12th August. This indicated that mystery shopping would take place throughout September and October 2003, and that the findings would be used to inform the advice review. The same information relating to the exercise was given to voluntary sector and directly delivered services alike. The details of the five areas to be tested through the exercise were included in the letter.
- 2.10 Also made explicit was the Council's undertaking to abide by appropriate ethical standards and it was made clear that details of the time of contacts and the members of staff involved in responding to the mystery customers would not be made available to agencies. This was to prevent the exercise from being used as evidence to chastise individual members of staff.
- 2.11 The final report from the consultants was shared with all funded agencies and a meeting held with them to discuss the findings on 13th January 2004. A number of recommendations were made by the meeting for further consideration in the advice services review. These related to:
- The need for standardised signposting and referral arrangements
 - For a central information point to be established
 - To provide reception staff in all advice agencies with an agreed training package

3 Recommendations

Scrutiny committee are asked to note the report, to comment on the approach taken and on the implications for future advice service provision, and specifically:

1. To comment on the approach taken in the conduct of the mystery shopping exercise;
2. To agree that future advice provision take into account the need for consistent customer care standards in service delivery;
3. To agree that future advice provision be supported by a central information point that can effectively signpost and refer enquirers to available services.

4 Financial & Legal Implications

4.1 Financial Implications

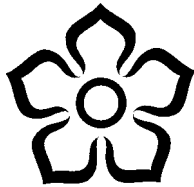
- 4.1.1 The cost of the mystery shopping report was £6445, and this was met from the Advice Services Budget for 2003/04.

4.2 Legal Implications

- 4.2.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

5 Report Author

Damon Gibbons
Head of Advice Services
Ext. 8652
gibbd001@leicester.gov.uk



Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED: All Wards

Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny

4th May 2004

Mystery Shopping of Advice Services

Report of the Corporate Director for Regeneration & Culture

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS

1 Financial Implications

- 1.1 The cost of the mystery shopping exercise was £6445, and this has been met from the Advice Services Budget for 2003/04.

2 Legal Implications

- 2.1 There are no legal implications.

3 Other Implications

OTHER IMPLICATIONS	YES/NO	PARAGRAPH REFERENCES WITHIN SUPPORTING PAPERS
Equal Opportunities	YES	Para 1.10
Policy	YES	Advice Strategy para 3.5 Annual Review of Advice Services para 1.25
Sustainable and Environmental	NO	None
Crime and Disorder	NO	None
Human Rights Act	NO	None
Older People on Low Income	YES	Para 1.15

3.2 Risk Assessment Matrix

	Risk	Likelihood L/M/H	Severity Impact L/M/H	Control Actions (if necessary/or appropriate)
1	No risks identified			
2				

L - Low
M - Medium
H - High

L - Low
M - Medium
H - High

4 Background Papers – Local Government Act 1972

- Advice Strategy – Cabinet, February 2002
- Annual Review of Advice Services – SPAR, February 2003
- Best Value Inspection Report, Audit Commission, July 2001

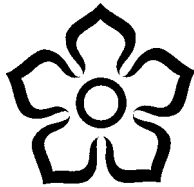
5 Consultations

Consultee

Community Legal Services Partnership
Advice services subject to the exercise

Date Consulted

14th May 2003
February 2003 (negotiation of service specifications); 12th August 2003 (prior to start of fieldwork); 13th January 2004 (on receiving the results).



Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED: All Wards

Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny

4th May 2003

Mystery Shopping of Advice Services

Report of the Corporate Director for Regeneration & Culture

Report

1. Background

- 1.1 Advice Services were subject to a Best Value Review in 2000/2001, and this was subject to external inspection by the audit commission. The inspectors' report was published in July 2001 and made a finding that advice services were "poor, but probably going to improve".
- 1.2 In arriving at their findings, the inspection team drew attention to the "wide variation in the quality of Council funded and provided services in terms of how they handle customers and resolve their enquiries" (para 10, BV Inspection Report). This view had been formulated following the inspectors' own limited mystery shopping of advice services conducted as part of the inspection process.
- 1.3 The Council was also criticised for not carrying out independent checks of service quality on its own or funded services. The recommendations of the Best Value Improvement Plan therefore included the need to establish common quality assurance systems, and to conduct mystery shopping exercises against these as part of a future review of advice provision in the city.
- 1.4 Progress towards this was made with the adoption of an overarching strategy for advice services by Cabinet on 25th February 2002. The Advice Strategy, which had itself been subject to consultation with funded agencies and the Community Legal Service Partnership, included a "Charter" for advice services, setting out customer care requirements. The Charter is reproduced as appendix 1 to this report.
- 1.5 The Advice Strategy also made clear the intention of the local authority to monitor the performance of agencies in respect of the Charter via service specifications.
- 1.6 In February 2003, an update on progress being made towards the aims of the Advice Strategy was provided to Strategic Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny. This highlighted the intention to undertake a mystery shopping exercise against the requirements of the advice service charter in 2003/04 to inform a review of advice provision in that year.
- 1.7 In April 2003, new contracts were issued to advice agencies following the transfer of a number of services to E,R&D from Social Care & Health. These service specifications included a specific requirement that:

“The organisation agrees to allow the City Council to audit the services provided both by providing monitoring information to the City Council and by accepting the use of “mystery shopping” exercises by the authority or its agents.

- 1.8 In July 2003, the Council tendered for the work, and received applications from three consultancy firms.
- 1.9 The project brief required consultants to undertake a total of 28 telephone interviews and 21 face to face visits, allocated across agencies on the basis of customer numbers and the methods of delivery most used within those agencies.
- 1.10 The brief also required preliminary work to be undertaken to devise a number of scenarios that would test:
 - (i) access to services, both over the telephone and physically; to include
 - (ii) getting through to someone who will take responsibility;
 - (iii) politeness and helpfulness of staff;
 - (iv) problem diagnosis – how well and quickly the adviser gets to the root of the problem;
 - (v) accuracy, relevance and completeness of the advice given;
 - (vi) signposting and referrals where appropriate.
- 1.11 The tender exercise resulted in three bids being received. These ranged in cost from £5500 to £8428.75 (excl. VAT).
- 1.12 Two consultancy firms were asked to attend an interview with the Head of Advice Services and the Advice Services Development Officer to provide a detailed presentation and answer questions regarding their proposals, following which a decision was made to commission the work from MEL Consultants Limited at a cost of £6445 excl. VAT.
- 1.13 The decision to appoint MEL was made following their presentation and particularly in view of their ability to start the work promptly as they have a standing field interview team in place. The team was also able to reflect some of the ethnic diversity of Leicester. Account was also taken of their previous work in the city which had included work on the Leicester HAZ/ SRB5 community health audit; the 2000/01 New Parks community review; and the 2002 Highfields Sure Start family needs review.
- 1.14 The mystery shopping exercise was overseen by Dr. Rob Pocock at MEL Ltd and two meetings were held between the Advice Services Development Officer and MEL Limited prior to the “live” phase of the exercise in September 2003. These agreed the scenario questions and confirmed contact details for the advice agencies.
- 1.15 The scenarios that were used covered five welfare advice themes as below:
 - (i) elderly care support
 - (ii) minimum wage problems
 - (iii) a debt advice case
 - (iv) an immigration/ employment scenario
 - (v) a housing problem
- 1.16 On 12th August 2003, all advice agencies were advised of the rough dates for the fieldwork phase of the exercise, and its purpose. All advice agencies were asked to contact the Head of Advice Services in the event that they had any questions.

No objections were raised by agencies to the brief outlined for the exercise at that stage.

- 1.17 On completion of the exercise, the executive summary of results was distributed to agencies and on 13th January 2004, a feedback meeting took place to consider the results. This was attended by all funded advice agencies.
- 1.18 The meeting agreed that three recommendations should be made as a result of the mystery shopping exercise for inclusion in the advice services review. These were:
 - (i) That there was a need to improve consistency of customer care standards across advice providers, and that this could be done by providing common training to reception staff in all advice agencies;
 - (ii) That improvements needed to be made in signposting and referral standards, and that a central point which held up to date information could be used to improve this;
 - (iii) That agencies should work more closely together in terms of following agreed referral protocols.

2 Relationship to the Advice Review

- 2.1 The findings of the mystery shopping exercise have informed the proposals, currently out for public consultation, in the advice services review. However, it is important to recognise that they have not been used to justify funding for individual services or to outweigh other performance information available to the Council. Instead, the results of the exercise strongly suggest that advice services in the city do not operate cohesively, and that users currently face a “lottery” as regards the standards of care that they can expect from agencies.
- 2.2 Of further note was the specific recommendation of the feedback meeting in January that a central information point be established to provide information on the opening hours of agencies and to assist in linking enquirers to the most appropriate agency to their needs. This recommendation was similar to one of the proposals issued for discussion by the Council in October 2003. However, feedback on that document appears to indicate that a service which did not itself give advice, but only provided details of other services available, would not go far enough in terms of improving access. As a result, the proposals currently out for consultation indicate an intention to create a central service that will provide both advice at an initial stage, and then link users to the appropriate service for their need.
- 2.3 Linking users to other services will necessarily entail the central point to have up to date information concerning both the services available (including services that are not funded by the Council such as private practice solicitors) and to develop good working relationships with statutory agencies such as JobCentre Plus so that referral can be made directly to their mainstream services where this is appropriate.
- 2.4 Issues surrounding the common training for advice services reception staff will also be included in the work programme of the Advice Group once the advice review has been concluded.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

- 3.1 The mystery shopping exercise represents a valid method of testing the immediate impression that services provide to their customers, and in particular for testing the relationships between advice services and how this might affect enquirers who do not know which service would be most appropriate to their

needs. It also gives a valuable insight to the accessibility and quality of services received from a customers' perspective that would otherwise be unavailable.

- 3.2 The exercise was conducted on the clear recommendation of the Best Value Inspectors.
- 3.3 The procurement of the consultants to conduct the exercise was carried out in accordance with the Council's financial procedures.
- 3.4 At all stages of the exercise, funded advice agencies were provided with information relating to the mystery shopping and its purpose, and the agreed recommendations of the feedback meeting have been taken forwards in the Advice Review proposals.
- 3.5 As agreed with advice agencies, comments made in respect of individual agencies by mystery shoppers have not influenced the proposals made in respect of the advice review (for example, the proposal to continue to fund agency A as opposed to agency B is not based on the mystery shopping results), but the broader issues concerning the need to join up services and provide consistency of customer care have been taken forwards in the review.
- 3.6 In view of the above, Members are requested to endorse the approach taken during the course of the exercise, and to comment on how best to ensure that the recommendations of the report can be realised within the current Advice Services Review.

Report Author:

Damon Gibbons
Head of Advice Services
Ext. 8652

Gibbd001@leicester.gov.uk