

FROM: Audit and Risk Manager **SUBJECT:** Supporting People Services

TO: Head of Housing and Property Services **DATE:** 19 December 2012
Supporting People Services
Manager

C.C. Chief Executive
Head of Finance

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. In accordance with the Audit Plan for 2012/13, an examination of the above subject area has been completed recently and this report is intended to present the findings and conclusions for information and action where appropriate.
- 1.2. Wherever possible, results obtained have been discussed with the staff involved in the various procedures examined and their views are incorporated, where appropriate, in any recommendations made. My thanks are extended to all concerned for the help and co-operation received during the audit.

2. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF AUDIT

- 2.1. The audit examination was undertaken to report a level of assurance in respect of the structures and processes in place for ensuring economic, efficient and effective delivery of the services provided by the Council under the Supporting People framework.
- 2.2. The examination comprised an evidential risk-based appraisal of management systems in place covering the following areas as applicable:
- strategies and policies;
 - roles and responsibilities (internal and partnership);
 - processes and procedures;
 - improvement and development;
 - information assurance.
- 2.3. The findings are based on discussions with relevant staff and reference to documents and records as appropriate. The principal contact for the audit was Joan Hicks, Supporting People Services Manager.
- 2.4. For the area of information assurance, some reliance is placed on separate audits of the business applications pertaining to the Warwick Response Control Centre (undertaken in 2010) and ActiveH Housing Management (recently completed at the time of this report).

3. FINDINGS

3.1 General Background

3.1.1 Supporting People was introduced in 2003 as a national funding and grant programme for the provision of housing related support services designed to improve the quality of life for vulnerable people by enabling them to live independently in the community. Although there was nothing particularly new in the services being provided, Supporting People had the effect of amalgamating the variety of funding streams that had operated previously.

3.1.2 One of the underlying principles behind Supporting People was the partnership approach between various support agencies administered within unitary, county and metropolitan areas. Under this umbrella, Warwick District Council has acted as a provider of Supporting People services under four contracts administered by Warwickshire County Council:

- Very Sheltered Accommodation
- Peripatetic Wardens
- Older Persons' Designated Accommodation
- Community Alarm Service (Lifelines).

3.1.3 In recent years, much of the national framework has been dismantled and the term 'Supporting People' has become regarded as little more than a label. That said, the basic governance structures established within Warwickshire under the framework still exist. The four contracts still operate and are expected to continue until March 2014, but with variations introduced affecting the amounts of subsidy.

3.1.4 Until recently, funding was applied on a 'block subsidy' basis with payments based on quantified service usage. At the time of the audit, however, these were being converted to 'block gross' where the payments become essentially fixed but subject to ongoing review. The total funding to the Council under the above contracts in the year ended 31st March 2012 was just over £500,000.

3.1.5 The following inter-related factors point to the general framework for the provision of housing related support services being in a state of flux:

- withdrawal of the national Supporting People Strategy;
- withdrawal of the Warwickshire Supporting People Strategy 2008 to 2013 (a new draft interim strategy has been produced by Warwickshire County Council, but has still to be formally adopted at the time of this report);
- cessation of national collection and reporting of outcome statistics (from 2011);
- removal of Supporting People grant ring-fencing (2009);
- advent of Extra Care Housing (a remodelling of traditional sheltered accommodation services);

- pressure to find means of budget savings;
 - uncertainty over funding beyond March 2014 brought on by recent and forthcoming legislation (including in particular the Localism Act 2011, Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Health and Social Care Bill).
- 3.1.6 Given these constraints, the findings of this review can only give a current snapshot of a continually changing control environment.
- 3.1.7 An important 'positive' to note is the achievement in 2011 of Platinum Member status with the Telecare Services Association (TSA), in itself a key source of assurance that robust structures and processes for the Community Alarms service are in place.
- 3.1.8 It has been a management aspiration for several years to also seek accreditation from the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies (CSHS), but the wider appetite among the staff involved has not been conducive. Obligations under the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF), established nationally under the Supporting People programme, have covered a large measure of the criteria for CSHS accreditation.
- 3.1.9 Requirements under the QAF have slackened with the Department for Communities and Local Government, who originally led its development, no longer sponsoring it. The County Council now only sees it as an internal assessment model for the provider authorities without any report-back requirement.

3.2 Recommendations From Previous Audit

- 3.2.1 The previous audit undertaken in 2010 had focused on internal operations, in particular day-to-day resource management for the applicable services. The current status regarding the accepted recommendations arising is as follows:

| Recommendation | Current Position |
|---|--|
| Consideration should be given to holding regular meetings of the teams within the Supporting People service. <i>(Low risk)</i> | Monthly team meetings have been established with notes taken. |
| Guest room fees should be reviewed to ensure that all relevant costs are being recovered. <i>(Low risk)</i> | The fees levels have not been changed. The Supporting People Services Manager advised that raising the fee rates is seen as inappropriate as the guest rooms are still used for temporary homeless placements. |
| The cash transfer process from the individual schemes to Riverside House should be formalised, with specific documentation being in place to record any handover of cash. Alternatively, the cash handling process should be removed with invoices being raised so that monies can be paid directly to DMC in the usual manner. <i>(Medium risk)</i> | This issue has been recently re-examined as part of a Council-wide review of cash handling practices and a separate report with recommendations has been issued. |

| Recommendation | Current Position |
|--|---|
| The potential for Scheme Managers to place 'bulk repair requests' should be discussed with the Repairs staff. <i>(Low risk)</i> | It was advised that Scheme Managers now have the facility to input requests directly into the ActiveH Repairs System. Alternatively, requests can be telephoned directly through to Property Services. |
| A review of the 'internal' performance monitoring information should be performed with relevant performance indicators (especially the Response call times) being included within the formal Performance Monitoring system. <i>(Low risk)</i> | Quality management requirements for TSA accreditation address this in respect of the Lifeline service. Housing related support services do not specifically feature in the corporate Performance Management Framework suggesting a low priority in the context of the wider picture within Housing and Property Services. |
| The practice of temporarily housing homeless individuals in the very sheltered schemes should be reviewed. <i>(High Risk)</i> | It is advised that discussions had been held with the Head of Housing and Property Services involved. It was effectively decided that placement in the guest rooms at very sheltered establishments was preferable to the only other feasible alternative of external placement. 'Risk of harm to residents, staff or public' is recognised as an operational risk, but the risk profile does not mention temporary homeless placements as a potential cause. <u>Risk</u> <i>The risk of harm to residents, staff and bona fide visitors arising from temporary homeless placements in guest rooms at very sheltered schemes is not managed effectively.</i> <u>Recommendation</u> The risks pertaining to the practice of temporary homeless placements in guest rooms at very sheltered schemes should be considered as part of the next review of the Operational Risk Register, along with possible mitigation measures. |

3.3 Strategies and Policies

- 3.3.1 A draft interim Supporting People strategy for Warwickshire has been prepared by Warwickshire County Council and is to be submitted for final approval shortly. This was envisaged to effectively run from October 2012 with a review within 12 months.
- 3.3.2 For older people with support needs (which is the main focus of the services provided by the Council under the Supporting People framework), this document defines for the first time five 'commissioning principles'.
- 3.3.3 These generally appear to reflect the existing contracts for provision, although certain new features not previously specified emerge:

- specific requirement that staff employed in providing housing related support services have access to training on safeguarding older and vulnerable people and understanding and dealing with dementia.
 - 'personalisation' of support services;
 - piloting 'individualised budgets'.
- 3.3.4 The Supporting People Services Manager advised that staff training on safeguarding vulnerable clients is long established as a requirement under the QAF. Conversely, training on dementia is a new requirement.

Risk

Training requirements under the emerging strategy for housing related support services are not met.

Recommendation

Subject to clarification on requirements from the Commissioning Body and/or Warwickshire County Council as appropriate, arrangements should be put in place for staff training on understanding and dealing with dementia.

- 3.3.5 Personalisation and individualised budgets are future development areas linked to the Health and Social Care Bill.
- 3.3.6 The main sources of policy relating to delivery of Supporting People services are the specifications for the four contracts. Another key area of policy at partnership level is that of charging persons in receipt of Supporting People services.
- 3.3.7 Since its inception the charging policy has been based on a 4-tier scale of charges to tenants linked to the service received in each case with an effective exemption for 'protected' tenants and tenants eligible for housing benefit. The charges are reviewed annually as part of housing rents setting process and the underpinning policy provisions explained in the report to Executive.

3.4 **Roles and Responsibilities**

- 3.4.1 In each Supporting People partnership, there were two key bodies to oversee the framework for their respective areas – the commissioning body and the administering authority. Originally this was part of a mandatory structure model as a condition of receiving grant, but that prescription was removed when ring-fencing of the grant was discontinued.
- 3.4.2 In Warwickshire, the Commissioning Body continues to operate as does Warwickshire County Council in its role as Administering Authority. The Commissioning Body is made up of senior officers and elected members representing housing, health, social services and probation. Warwick District Council is represented by the Head of Housing and Property Services and the designated Portfolio Holder.

- 3.4.3 Details of the constitution originally agreed for the Commissioning Body have been taken out of publication. It was advised that the terms of reference contained are no longer regarded as fit for purpose and that new terms for reference are being drawn up at the time of this report.
- 3.4.4 As regards documented internal roles and responsibilities, the primary reference source has been the job descriptions for the relevant establishment posts. Although some of these are several years old, in most essentials they are seen as duly representative in the context of this examination.
- 3.4.5 The Supporting People Services Manager has designated overall responsibility for managing the provider role in terms of internal and relevant contracted resources. An establishment extract showed 54 current staff employed in four teams reporting to the Supporting People Services Manager.
- 3.4.6 The documentation gives the impression of a sound structure with due clarity of delegated roles, responsibilities and reporting lines and mechanisms.

3.5 Processes and Procedures

- 3.5.1 The operational processes involved are a mix of estate management, customer contact service, face-to-face contact with clients, contract management, and various administrative routines.
- 3.5.2 Documentation of processes and procedures was found to vary in form over the services. The Warwick Response Control Centre operation is supported by a web-based database resource and certain central administrative processes have been documented in notes and flow charts.
- 3.5.3 A Support Manual is adopted covering the support functions in the sheltered/very sheltered schemes and peripatetic/visiting services. It was acknowledged, however, that the Manual has not been revised for several years and certain aspects of it may now be out of date.

Risk

Inappropriate actions may be taken on the strength of outdated procedures.

Recommendation

The Support Manual should be reviewed and revised as necessary.

- 3.5.4 Staff resource and financial management processes had been examined in the previous audit and it was felt not necessary to repeat the process this time. It was, however, re-confirmed that staff cover for the support functions, including the Control Centre, is organised on a rota system using Excel spreadsheets.

3.6 Improvement and Development

- 3.6.1 The performance and improvement framework comes across as patchy and fragmented. The current year's Service Area Plan for Housing and Property Services makes no express reference to Supporting People Services and provides no customer measures relevant to that area.
- 3.6.2 Although the national collection and reporting of outcome statistics has ceased, the completion and submission to the County Council of quarterly performance data is still required. This is in the form of elaborate Excel workbooks.
- 3.6.3 The last self-assessment under the QAF was performed in 2010, therefore this cannot be regarded as an active contributor to improvement and development.
- 3.6.4 Inevitably, budget pressures have been a primary focus since 2010. The County Council was initially seeking savings of 25 per cent on funding by 2014, although it is advised that this target has now been eased and lower reductions applied up to this year.
- 3.6.5 The financial model supporting the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan now provides for absorption of Supporting People grant reductions in line with the County's original target and anticipated demise of grant funding after 10 years.
- 3.6.6 The Risk Log attached to the Business Plan anticipated an options appraisal on the impact of funding reduction leading to recommendations to be reported to the Executive in 2012 (this is now re-timetabled for 2014). It was advised that possible introduction of service charges to tenants outside the Supporting People umbrella is currently being considered.

3.7 Information Assurance

- 3.7.1 Tenancy and estate management aspects of support services are managed through the ActiveH system as is collection of Supporting People Charges from those not eligible for grant. The application has been separately reviewed with moderate assurance ascribed.
- 3.7.2 The Control Centre system was also subject to separate review in 2010, also with some significant but not major issues. A business continuity service has been procured from the maintenance contractor Tunstall.
- 3.7.3 A large volume of electronic material supporting the functions is held on the Council's network. In the earlier audit of Document Management Systems, attention had been drawn to unsecured content in the WDCShare environment, some of it personal information. The Supporting People Services Manager was alerted to some such content in her 'ownership' and this has been moved to a secure environment.
- 3.7.4 Significant amounts of paper-based information is in evidence in the Supporting People Services office area, much of it open to access.

3.7.5 However, with the open plan environment and a continuous staff presence around the vicinity, the risk of unauthorised persons gaining access is seen as remote.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The control framework is seen as providing due assurance of stability and effective service delivery through the changing environment with sound structures and processes in evidence. Minor issues emerged relating to a gap in the scope of staff training identified from the new regime governing the commissioning of support services and the currency of procedural documentation.

4.2 The placement of homeless persons in guest rooms at very sheltered schemes is an issue brought over from the previous audit. The practice is seen as accepting a risk, but without formally recognising it as such under the risk management framework. Recommendations have been incorporated to address the above issues.

4.3 For the longer term, reduction or loss of funding that up to now has helped to underpin the Council's housing related support services is high on the risk agenda. To address this, the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan has made provision to absorb this and to consider options to remediate the impact.

4.4 In the light of the above, we are able to give SUBSTANTIAL overall assurance that adequate controls are in place and that the applicable risks are managed effectively.

5 MANAGEMENT ACTION

5.1 Recommendations arising above are reproduced in the appended Action Plan with management response.

Richard Barr
Audit and Risk Manager