

# **Access to housing support services in the South West – sharing what works**

Report on survey carried out for  
South West Regional Provider Forum &  
South West Regional Implementation Group by  
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## The Survey

The South West Regional Provider Forum (RPF) and the South West Regional Implementation Group of Supporting People Managers (RIG) wished to share what was being learned from the introduction of various forms of single points of access to local authority funded housing support services.

So that all participants felt free to share both negative and positive feedback, it was agreed that this survey should be conducted on the basis of anonymous responses. The initial information on what access arrangements are currently in place was provided by Supporting People (SP) teams to the RIG Co-ordinator.

This survey asked respondents to state whether they were a commissioner or provider and in which area they worked. As many providers work in more than one local authority area, respondents were asked to give feedback on as many areas as they wished. They were asked if they thought the description of access arrangements for the authority area was correct and then for their views on what was working well and what needed to be improved. The majority of the responses required were therefore qualitative, free-text answers.

The survey was web-based and invitations to participate were emailed to SP teams via the RIG Co-ordinator and to providers via members of the RPF. It was open for responses from mid July to the end of August 09.

A total of 118 respondents completed the survey. This included 103 identifying themselves as providers and 15 as commissioners. This total counts all who answered the opening questions, about respondent type and areas where worked, and then went on to answer some or all of the detailed questions about the arrangements in their area. Responses ranged from comprehensive consideration of every question listed through to a few words on a few of the questions.

### Survey findings:

No area generated a uniformly positive or negative view of its current access arrangements. There is therefore no consensus on what works and no universally supported method of access which could be recommended to all as a result of this survey. There is across the board support for better and more comprehensive information for applicants and potential users of services. The need for local authority commissioners to have a strategic vision and high level direction of the support services they commission is acknowledged. There is not, however, consensus on the utility of the methods used to achieve this direction. There is an indication that the larger scale, more monolithic access systems have unintended, negative consequences for effective provision.

It must also be noted that people use the same names for different systems, and vice versa, and use what sound like the same systems in different ways. This issue of terminology and interpretation of names for systems must be taken into account by anyone reading the description of arrangements for an area with which they are not familiar.

This wide variety of responses has however generated a number of learning points which are summarised here.

◆ Housing support services are delivered to people with a very wide range of needs, circumstances and characteristics by organisations which are similarly diverse. The expectation that one simple access system can meet universally well that whole diversity of needs is unrealistic.

◆ Improving the fairness and efficiency of access systems and determining how decisions are made on which individual gets which service are two distinct tasks. With regard to the second task, any assumption that wherever there is a purchaser/provider split, needs assessment must be carried out by one side or the other, should be challenged and reviewed from the perspective of what will ensure that positive outcomes for service users are achieved for the most effective deployment of resources.

In a sector meeting a very diverse range of needs, where there is a strong focus on person-centred support planning by providers, a purchaser-based needs assessment system carries two main risks. Either it may consume a large proportion of the resources which would otherwise be available for service provision, as has been the case in many areas of adult social care assessment, or it may be so limited in scope that its mismatches of user to service create delays, voids and under-utilisation when inappropriate referrals have to be rejected..

◆ All systems of access will inevitably have both positive and negative aspects. There is no evidence that a perfect system can be designed. An open, even-handed analysis of the balance of advantages and disadvantages to all parties and stakeholders will improve the chances of the risks of negative consequences being understood and mitigated. The fact that higher risks are faced by less powerful stakeholders should not result in their impact being given a lighter weighting.

◆ No-one has perfect foresight and there will be unintended consequences however good a plan for the implementation of change to systems has been. The more ambitious the project, and the larger the scale of operations it encompasses, the larger the scale of the unintended or negative consequences will be and the more impact they will have on participants.

◆ Bureaucracies are likely to produce bureaucratic systems. These have their place and their advantages as well as their disadvantages but they do not start with a good fit with many of the client groups needing housing related support services. In this sector, voluntary sector organisations have generally used more personalised and informal systems to reach the socially excluded, chaotic, alienated people who do not make use of the universal services provided by statutory agencies and who are deterred by formal systems which require an ability to fill out forms, keep appointments, etc. The feedback on areas where more formal local authority run systems have been introduced has included examples of unintended consequences such as increased no-shows consequent on the de-personalising of the link between applicant and service and focus on progression through services of the traditionally older white male hostel resident rather than the younger, female, BME groups who have used this route much less.

◆ In many aspects of the Supporting People programme the need to protect the strengths of such person-centred approaches has had to be balanced with the introduction of more local government control and accountability, and many of the proposals to change methods of access illustrate this need for balance. Another strand in the history of the programme is the tendency for some commissioners to seek to move beyond strategic direction to micro management of services. On the question of access to services this is appearing where local authority teams are not satisfied that provider partners' participation in strategy development, the strategic relevance aspect of service reviews, specification of eligibility criteria and use of performance monitoring will ensure that service outcomes meet their strategic aims, but seek to also control individual service allocation decisions.

◆ Finally, how any system works is affected by human factors such as the quality of the relationships between the partners, the culture of the organisations involved, including their approach to supporting competence and a collaborative approach to developing best practice. Implementation of any measures to improve access for those needing to use support services will either build on, or be set back by, commissioners' and providers' previous experiences of working together.

The confidential version of this report sent to the RPF & RIG contains, as well as the summary of access arrangements, the full text of the respondents' comments on what exists in their area from which these general conclusions were drawn. That detailed feedback will be of value to commissioners and provider forums working on access improvement in their own area, but was thought to be too open to misquoting out of context to be circulated more widely.

## Summary of access arrangements in South West region

<p><b>BANES</b>                  Move towards all sheltered housing to be accessed through Choice Based Lettings.                  Statutory Homeless - Housing team have 100% nomination rights to all 3 schemes.                  All others are accessed through a variety of routes. Some schemes are required to accept a proportion of referrals from particular agencies.                  In the case of Young People, one provider runs a number of services and provides a single point of access for all their services                  Currently investigating option of gateway</p>
<p><b>BOURNEMOUTH</b>                  Some specific access routes for particular client groups.                  Mental Health - Mental Health Panel (also advises on service needs)                  Offenders - through the Dorset Offender Gateway                  Learning Disabilities - through LD Team and Keyrings                  Homelessness - through Housing Solutions team                  Young People - through Housing Solutions team                  Rough Sleepers - Direct Access and Assertive Outreach Team                  Drug and Alcohol - through BAT/DIP (Bournemouth Assessment Team)                  All sheltered housing is through Choice Based Lettings</p>
<p><b>BRISTOL</b>                  Housing Support Register in development; will include short term homelessness client groups (in interim access services through the Accommodation Services team) other services to be added in the future: Drug and Alcohol, floating etc.                  Single point of access team being established through new Housing Solutions service to complement Housing Support Register                  Sheltered housing through Choice Based Lettings; Extra Care services are accessed through Social Services only                  All others through individual applications or referrals</p>
<p><b>CORNWALL</b>                  Mainly through individual applications or referrals                  (Gateway project under consideration - funds approved for design process)                  Floating support services are supplied county wide by one provider so is in effect a "mini gateway"</p>
<p><b>DEVON</b>                  Individual applications or referrals</p>
<p><b>DORSET</b>                  County wide Floating Support for ages 16 – 64 through one contract so acts as a single point of access. Dorset Gateway provides central access points for offenders. All other accommodation based services are accessed by either direct referrals to providers, or referrals to providers are made and prioritised by the local Housing Advice team. Multi agency panels are in operation across the county and oversee the referral process, also looking at unmet need, move-on etc.</p>
<p><b>GLOUCESTERSHIRE</b>                  Domestic Abuse sector have a Central Allocation and Referral Point (CARP)                  All others through individual applications and referrals</p>

<p><b>NORTH SOMERSET</b> Some referrals limited through contracts but otherwise all referrals are accepted Plans are in place to develop a needs-matching electronic gateway in the next 6 months (needs matched to vacancies). There are also plans for specialist referrals via particular joint funded posts for Learning Disabilities, Young People and the Offender, Drug and Alcohol client groups. There are also links to Choice based lettings and One Stop Shop Housing office</p>
<p><b>PLYMOUTH</b> Generally all services can be accessed through all referral routes although a Brokerage system and panels are in place to prioritise some applicants</p>
<p><b>POOLE</b> Housing Brokerage covers all Accommodation Based services, all though there are still some cases of self referral. All sheltered housing properties have support services linked to the accommodation. Applicants apply for the accommodation through Home Choice and not the housing brokerage.</p>
<p><b>SOMERSET</b> All access routes are open with the exception of Extra Care Housing where a joint allocation policy is in place</p>
<p><b>SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE</b> Most referrals channelled through a specially funded post in the Homechoice team. Sheltered accommodation accessed through Choice Based Lettings</p>
<p><b>SWINDON</b> Individual applications or referrals A gateway for prospective mental health residents</p>
<p><b>TORBAY</b> All services accessed through the Torbay Hub</p>
<p><b>WILTSHIRE</b> Individual applications or referrals</p>