

Supporting People - the truth behind the myth

Times are changing in supported housing. For so long the unglamorous wing of the welfare state, housing is at last under the spotlight and with the focus for once on supported provision for the vulnerable. We are now only hours away from SP Day, 1st April 2003 (and this is no joke!) when the very fabric of the supported housing system in England will change forever. To many people, understanding of housing with support has remained vague so these changes will hopefully shed a little light on the mystery that is supported housing. This article aims to begin the process of demystifying Supporting People and enabling you to make sense of the brave new world.

Before we go any further, it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by supported housing. Most people are familiar with the concept of refuges for women fleeing domestic violence, sheltered housing for older people, semi-independence projects for young people leaving Local Authority Care, Supported Lodging and Adult Placement schemes for people with mental health difficulties, group homes for people with learning disabilities and the like. These projects will vary enormously in terms of length of stay, level of support offered and type of accommodation available but the one thing they have in common is that they offer housing with support that is provided as a condition of tenancy. For Supporting People purposes, "support" is defined as "housing related support which enables a person to remain in a tenancy and move towards independence". Examples of this might include helping clients complete benefit forms, explaining tenancy conditions, assisting with life skills like cooking, budgeting, gaining meaningful occupation, etc. All this is very different from hands-on personal care which might include assistance with washing, feeding and administering medication and is funded in different ways.

Prior to Supporting People, housing related support was funded from a range of sources, the main ones being Housing Benefit, Supported Housing Management Grants (from the Housing Corporation), Probation Accommodation Grants and DSS Section 30 Grant Aid which for some projects lead to a very complicated system of administration. It also contributed to a very variable level of accountability and monitoring in the sector where some

projects were being closely examined by a number of funders, whereas others were simply receiving Housing Benefit without anybody looking at the quality of service. To put it bluntly, uncapped amounts of public money were being poured into a sector providing services to some of the most vulnerable people in society with only limited scrutiny. Whilst recognising that a lot of extremely positive and cost-effective work was being done, often with politically unpopular groups like offenders and drug and alcohol dependent clients, it became clear that something had to change.

These concerns were brought to a head by several court cases which challenged the legality of using Housing Benefit to pay for services other than rent. Once this had been accepted, it was obvious that the whole system of the funding supported housing was going to have to change. The Department of Transport, Local Government and Regions (now reformed into the ODPM - Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) started talking to the Department of Social Security (now the DWP - Department of Work and Pensions) along with the Department of Health (still the DoH) and Home Office and so the idea of Supporting People was born.

Although initially conceived as way of streamlining the funding of the sector by separating the cost of support from basic rent, Supporting People has also brought with it a raft of new measures to improve the quality of service provision. It will boost accountability by a robust regime of quality monitoring and reviews (of which more later) and aims to bring about increased user involvement in service development and delivery. It will also devolve power for monitoring existing services and developing new ones to a local level which should mean more effective joint commissioning and more appropriate services for local people.

Any new system is going to require new bodies to be developed and Supporting People is no exception. At times it feels as if a whole new language has been created to cover all the aspects of the programme. AAs, CBs, SP3s, RIGs, THB, KWEB and QAF are just a few examples of acronyms that have entered the language of the sector along with Core Strategy Groups, Inclusive Forums, Steady

State Guidance and Validation Visits. The key contact for most service providers, be they local authority in-house providers, Registered Social Landlords, Housing Associations or small private providers will be the local Supporting People teams. These vary in size and structure according to need and funds available and are made up of people from a wide variety of backgrounds including housing and project management, strategy, commissioning, the voluntary sector and the like. Most have faced a very steep learning curve and a plethora of changing information coming out of central government.

So what has actually happened so far? SP teams have written Shadow Strategies which detail how they will provide services to all the relevant client groups in their area. These had to be completed by autumn 2002 and will be developed into full strategies by summer 2003. They are crucial documents for providers as they provide a backbone to future service needs and delivery and should be scrutinised to understand which direction your local authority plans to take services. Interim contracts have now been issued to all providers who registered an interest in Supporting People by completing the now legendary SP3 form which gave information about the type and level of service being provided, along with the similarly renowned THB questionnaire which provided details of the cost of providing the service.

There are two types of contract; the first is described as Block Gross Contract which is normally issued to providers of so-called short term services where the individual aims to move on to independent living within two years (or increase their capacity for it in that time). Services receiving this type of contract might include domestic violence refuges, homeless hostels, projects for young people leaving care and other schemes where people stay to (re)learn independent living skills and then move on to independent living. The amount of money paid to these projects is based on the unit cost per head multiplied by the maximum capacity of the scheme minus 10% for voids.

The second type of contract is described as a Block Subsidy Contract and is normally issued to providers of long term services where clients stay for longer than two years or "home for life" schemes. Most sheltered schemes have been issued with this type of contract as well as some projects for people with mental health difficulties and learning disabilities. The grants paid to these schemes will be on the basis of the actual number of people in the scheme who are receiving a service at any one time. It will be the responsibility of the provider to pass information to their SP team about changes in tenants so that the correct amount of money can be transferred.

In theory, this should make for more streamlined administration at a project level and once the initial transition to the new regime is completed, staff will be freed up to provide improved support services to tenants. By devolving power to a local level, government has created a system whereby projects can go to their SP teams for support and guidance in running and developing their project. Now that the contracts have been issued and we find ourselves in the "steady state" of Supporting People, work can begin in one of the crucial areas of the SP programme - monitoring and review.

For some providers, this will be the biggest difference they notice under Supporting People. ODPM have issued masses of information about the quality and monitoring process which will oversee Supporting People but the principles are actually quite straightforward. In order to be issued with an interim contract, providers had to fulfil six basic criteria:

- Health and safety
- Confidentiality
- Complaints
- Equal Opportunity
- Appropriate staffing
- Insurance - public liability, employer liability, professional indemnity (in some cases)

Each contract will include a date at which it will be reviewed and this will vary according to area as each SP team draws up it's own three year review programme based on local factors and driving forces. The Quality Assessment Framework (QAF), which is the ODPM designed structure within which SP teams will review services, contains 17 service objectives covering a wide range of areas for monitoring. Four of these are core objectives which must be satisfactorily met at first review in order to receive a steady state contract. These are:

- Security, Health and Safety
- Protection from abuse
- Fair access, diversity and inclusion
- Needs assessment and support planning

A system of grading from D to A has been devised whereby providers must assess themselves against the standards and show evidence that they are meeting the required level of performance. In the case of the first two standards, failure to achieve level C will represent a serious risk to staff and users and will require providers to take immediate action to improve performance in these areas.

Providers will also have to provide some basic information (Service Performance Indicators - SPIs) about service delivery.

- Occupancy - how many people have actually taken up the service?
- Service availability - is the service operating at full capacity?
- Staff availability - is staffing at the same level of full time equivalents as stated on the SP3?

But will Supporting People make any real difference to service users? The short answer is yes and no. For people currently in accommodation and in receipt of services, they will have received letters from Housing Benefit to say that their HB is reducing but that the cost of their housing support will in most cases be covered by Supporting People grants. For those who are considering work as a viable option but who had previously been deterred by the prohibitive nature of the benefit system under which they would not have been any better off, this is a great opportunity to pursue work as an option. For new tenants moving into long term schemes after April, there are potential issues around paying for support as local authorities now have the power to charge people who do not receive Housing Benefit or who do not pass a Fairer Charging Means Assessment for support services. In terms of service delivery, many providers have used Supporting People as an opportunity to evaluate and improve their existing services and develop new ones, particularly Floating Support schemes where the support is linked to the person not the property. And tenants

should not be surprised to find themselves being increasingly consulted in the way their services are delivered and developed. User involvement is one of the tenets of Supporting People and is mentioned in almost all of the service objectives as a way of improving the service.

So are there any downsides to this exciting new programme?! There have been accusations from some quarters that some social service departments have used SP as an opportunity to shunt some costs of provision, particularly in the mental health and learning disability field, onto housing related support. This is not entirely unconnected to the fact that the size of the Supporting People pot was much larger than expected by both the ODPM and the Treasury. This has led to the insistence from government that, despite previous assurances to the contrary that SP was not about cutting spending in the sector, savings of 3% will have to be made in the first year from current provision. This has yet to be clarified on a national and local level and providers are encourage to talk to their local SP teams about how these savings are likely to be made. There are also concerns among smaller providers that the monitoring requirements are excessively onerous and that some simply do not have the skills, experience or resources to fulfil all the objectives in the QAF. SITRA has and will continue to provide training and advice on all these matters and is sympathetic to the needs of all providers, large and small in a time of such huge change.

So what should you do as someone with a stake in the supported housing sector be it as a provider, referring agent or interested party.

- Try and keep abreast of developments in the SP programme - it is a developing, organic project which will continue to change and grow as it matures.
- If you are a provider, make sure you have seen/.contributed to/featured in your SP team's strategy and make sure they know who you are!
- Finally, ensure you are ready for your review by checking the seven points mentioned earlier - check you meet the four core service objectives and three service performance indicators.
- And last but not least, be proud that you are contributing to a sector that at last is receiving the recognition it deserves.

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NETWORK ARTICLE GLOSSARY

AA - Administering Authority, the local county or unitary council which enters into contract with the providers

CB - Commissioning Body, a local alliance of housing, social services, probation and health bodies that approves the Supporting People strategy

CSDG - also known as Core Strategy Group. This partnership consists of similar agencies to the Commissioning Body and is responsible for developing the Supporting People strategy

Fairer charging means assessment - an assessment carried out by local Social Services teams to ascertain a client's financial means and ability to pay for support

Floating Support - a peripatetic housing support service providing short term support to tenants

GC&S - general counselling and support, the technical term for "support" which will be eligible for a Supporting People grant

Inclusive Forum - meeting of local providers co-ordinated by SP team to keep updated on SP issues

KWEB - also known as the SPKWEB or Supporting People Knowledge Website at www.spkweb.org.uk which is an ODPM (see below) website containing up to date information for SP teams and providers about Supporting People

Legacy funding - funding streams which will cease to exist post April 2003 which previously paid for housing related support

PAGS - Probation Accommodation Grants, former source of funding for projects for (ex) offenders

ODPM - the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, central government department with responsibility for Supporting People

QAF - Quality Assessment Framework which defines the standards against which providers will be measured during the review process

Provider - an organisation providing housing related support e.g. RSL, local authority, voluntary sector and private companies

RIG - regional implementation group, made up groups of local Supporting People lead officers

RSL - registered social landlord e.g. housing associations, local council housing departments

Section 30 Grant Aid - one of the streams of legacy funding in supported housing, previously paid by the DSS (Department of Social Security, now the Department of Work and Pensions)

Service review - a review of the strategic relevance, quality, performance and cost effectiveness of an SP service

Shadow Strategy - the one year strategy co-ordinated by SP teams to showcase the local objectives and needs of providers and user of supported housing

SHMG - Supported Housing Management Grant, former primary source of funding for supported housing awarded by the Housing Corporation

SP3 - form that providers had to complete to give information about the services they provide

Steady State - the period from April 2003 onwards when Supporting People "goes live"

THB - transitional housing benefit, the name for the money which has been paid to providers in the interim period to cover the cost of GC&S (see above)

Validation visits - a visit by the SP team to check whether the service being delivered meets the required standards