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**Introduction by Councillor Josephine Green**  
*Lead Member: Sheltered Housing Review Group*

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The provision of supported housing for the older and vulnerable members of the community is an important public service. It is a service that must be always sensitive to the special needs of those that live in the sheltered housing schemes we provide. For this reason it is important that the services are delivered with great care and sensitivity. It is in this context that we have undertaken our independent review of changes that were made to the sheltered housing service - particularly the removal of live-in wardens that started earlier this year.

This is a summary of the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Sheltered Housing Review Group. Please accept our apologies for the length and complexity of this summary - you will appreciate that the full review runs to some 40 pages and we didn't want to leave out important information. Where possible, we have tried to remove the jargon and simplify the wording slightly. The full report can be found in the common room of each sheltered housing scheme. A copy is available on request from the council - please ring 01722 434408 for a copy.

The nature of the review and the public outcry generated by the changes has made the members of the review group mindful of the responsibility they hold. From the outset, we have tried to ensure that we have a full understanding of the changes that took place, the reasons for the changes, the way the changes were introduced and the impact the changes had on tenants and on the housing support officers who deliver the service. We have consulted widely - over 160 tenants have contributed their views in writing. We have taken evidence from those involved - from politicians and Council officers, from tenants and housing support officers. We have examined legal questions and we have taken a look at best practice from beacon councils and elsewhere. Let me assure you that no stone has been left unturned.

All of the information we have gathered during the 6 months that it has taken to complete the review is now published as part of this report. The supporting papers may be inspected at Salisbury Library or at the Council Offices, Bourne Hill, Salisbury - please contact the Council's Scrutiny Team (tel: 01722 434408) for details.

I am confident that this report is an open and honest attempt to take an independent view of the issues involved. We acknowledge areas where praise is deserved but we have not shied away from criticism where we feel that it is justified. The report discusses the issues and draws conclusions based on our findings. The recommendations aim to address concerns raised by tenants and to put right some of the shortcomings we identified; but above all we hope this report will lead to the provision of a better service, provided in a caring and equitable way into the future - a service of which the Council may be proud.

Finally, and most importantly, many thanks to those scheme residents who gave us a clear and personal insight into their lives.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Josephine Green". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

**Councillor Josephine Green**  
Sheltered Housing Review Group  
Lead Member,  
22 November 2005

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AVAILABLE : CALL 01722 434408**

# Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel

## *A Review of Changes to the Council's Sheltered Housing Service*

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### **The need for change - conclusions:**

The evidence considered by the review supports the need for changes to the way sheltered housing provision is managed. The need to act quickly was justified in order to ensure that services meet the standards required by Government to obtain funding available from the Supporting People programme.

The decision to move wardens off-site was influenced by the introduction of new employment contracts for wardens, the problems associated with recruitment and retention and the high levels of sickness, as well as the need to address the Government's new Supporting People programme. The national trend is moving away from traditional scheme based wardens towards floating support.

### **The way decisions were taken - conclusions:**

The council report that recommended the removal of the wardens was well argued, considered available options and incorporated a risk assessment that highlighted the likely disapproval by tenants. Members acted in good faith by following the advice of its professional advisors in the reasonable expectation that the changes would be managed in a professional and sensitive manner. However, important legal advice was not included in the report.

Meaningful consultation with tenants should have been undertaken before the Council reached its decision. The failure to consult the Tenant's Panel was particularly regrettable and acted to restrict wider awareness of the proposals. The Tenants' Panel should have been given an opportunity to comment on the proposals before the Council's Cabinet considered them. The time set aside by the Council to consider and determine this matter was short but not untypical.

### **Main Recommendations:**

1. In future proper notice should be given of any major changes to the management of the Council's sheltered accommodation.
2. That in future similar reports considered by the Cabinet should incorporate a consultation statement setting out: who has been consulted; the results of the consultation and the actions taken to address the matters raised during the consultation.
3. The Council should ensure that future reports on matters affecting tenants of sheltered housing schemes are first presented for consideration by the Tenant's Panel and the views of the Panel should be incorporated into reports presented to the Cabinet.
4. The Council's consultation strategy should be amended to incorporate procedures for consultation with tenants.

### **How decisions were implemented - conclusions:**

The introduction of the changes was handled in an unsatisfactory manner and there was a lack of forward planning. The Council has no effective change management strategy. Many authorities now have such strategies. Experience gained during the merger of Clays Orchard and Horsehill should have alerted officers to the potential problems. There was no project management plan to guide the changes. This resulted in serious failures, inconsistencies and confusion.

Changes were introduced at a time when the service was overstretched by high sickness levels. Communication with tenants relied too heavily on the community scheme managers - many were absent and some did not fully understand the changes themselves. No formal notification was sent to tenants explaining clearly and simply the changes that were to take place. Subsequent information was jargonistic and difficult for some residents to understand which caused further confusion and disquiet.

The removal of wardens from schemes was not accompanied by an impact assessment for the scheme and residents concerned. This was a serious failure and caused disruption to the schemes and disquiet for the residents. The resulting problems have still not been adequately addressed some six months later.

### **Main Recommendations**

5. That the council should draw up a change management strategy as soon as possible and a project management plan be adopted for all significant changes to sheltered housing in the future.
6. That a communication and consultations procedure be developed for the sheltered housing service, this to include a promise to consult prior to any significant changes to the service, the use of plain English in written communications, the development of an appropriate mix of consultation and communication tools that suit the needs of the clients concerned and a commitment to act on the results of feedback received.
7. Proposals should be adopted for the greater involvement of residents in the management of the sheltered housing service - through a forum (or other existing body). This forum to include representation from advocacy agencies such as Age Concern and Social Services.
8. That individual scheme assessments be reviewed annually.

### **The impact of the changes - conclusions:**

The new system has seen improvements to service continuity and cost effectiveness. This has enabled the Council to meet the assessment criteria for Supporting People and secure funding to support the service into the future. Record keeping and liaison with care providers has seen a marked improvement under the new scheme.

However, a one-size-fits-all service is not compatible with the diversity of client need and range of accommodation provided. There is also an inequality of support available to Council tenants based on whether they live in a sheltered scheme or in council accommodation elsewhere and this needs to be addressed. The allocation of sheltered housing is not linked closely enough to the assessed needs of the individual and is not always handled sympathetically.

The geographical areas covered by the housing support officers are large, resulting in excessive travel and too many officers visiting each scheme.

Moving wardens off-site removed a single point of accountability for the service, which has resulted in declining standards in some schemes. The added value of the live-in warden in terms of security, responsiveness and accountability has not been addressed by the new system. Residents are worried that it may now take longer to respond to the emergency alarm and there is no comprehensive and systematic assessment of standards incorporated into service delivery.

The review also concluded that residents have too little say in the management of their schemes.

### **Main Recommendations:**

9. The Council should look again at the provision of housing related support to older and vulnerable tenants who do not live in sheltered schemes.
10. The allocation of sheltered housing should be more closely linked to the assessed needs of the individual.
11. The need for 'extra-care' accommodation should be re-examined.
12. The allocation of younger individuals to sheltered schemes should be examined again taking into account the views and concerns expressed by older and more vulnerable residents.
13. That a new appointments service be introduced to avoid residents having to wait for long periods or to miss scheduled visits - where appointments cannot be kept or when someone unknown to the tenants is to visit for the first time a call should be made to inform the tenant.
14. That the geographical teams be reviewed and housing support officers be allocated a primary responsibility for only a single or small number of schemes (no more than 3), but be available to cover other designated schemes during times of absence or sickness. This will reinstate the direct

link between a scheme and an accountable person, minimise the number of officers visiting each scheme and reduce travelling costs.

15. Targets for the time taken to respond to an emergency alarm call should be set, published and monitored.
16. That measures and procedures be set in place to ensure that personal information held by the CallConnect Centre (including telephone contacts for next of kin, doctors, etc) is kept up to date at all times and provided appropriately when required.
17. That proposals be developed at the earliest opportunity for the comprehensive and systematic assessment of service standards, including the possibility of independent assessments.
18. That Council approves the introduction of an Older and Vulnerable Persons Consultative Forum incorporating tenants and representatives of advocacy agencies such as Age Concern, the PCT and Social Services. This forum (or such existing forum as may be appropriate) to report to the Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel
19. That the Council investigate the reasons for the high levels of sickness absence among housing support officers with a view to addressing any underlying causes.
20. That the Council should conduct a full review of the impact the changes brought about by the recommendations contained in this report after 12 months. That review should focus on the views of those directly involved - the tenants and the housing support officers.

### **The legal implications - conclusions:**

The advice received by the Review group makes it clear that there has been no breach of the tenancy agreements held by residents of the sheltered housing schemes. However, the council probably did fail to comply fully with Section 105 of the Housing Act in the way it introduced changes to the sheltered housing service.

The documentation that accompanies tenancy agreements is in need of updating and reissuing - the papers currently in the possession of many tenants are unclear, confusing and out of date.

### **Recommendation:**

21. That Cabinet instructs the officers to revise and reissue all supporting documents provided for tenants. These materials should be subject to approval by the Council's legal advisor, should be concise, clear, written in plain English and submitted for comments to the Tenants' Panel.