Emily Ashford 24106488 Stroud District Council – Tenant Services 2.7.12 – 8.8.12 Report

Stroud District Council is secondary to Gloucester County Council and a public sector organisation. The main role of the council is a commitment and duty of care to the local area. This relates to public services such as, housing, leisure, environmental care and local elections. I have completed a 6 week placement at Stroud District Council. My interest lies with social housing and Stroud was kind enough to let me shadow staff across Tenant Services, who are responsible for all the council housing stock and the management of tenants. Stroud has roughly 5000 council properties; the area is fairly affluent, although there is an aging population and some significant areas of deprivation. As I went from section to section (for example, Performance and Improvement, Empty Homes, Supported Housing) I helped staff with their on-going project work and spent a lot of time off site and observing meetings. I also wanted to gain experience in talking to residents and get a better idea of what it is like to be a tenant in social housing. I was able to do this by contacting residents on behalf of the council for a number of different reasons, and also while shadowing members of staff, visiting tenants in their homes.

I mentioned wanting to improve problem solving skills in my grant application. With relation to the jobs given to me at Stroud I think I was able to do this. On a number of occasions I made phone calls to tenants for a variety of reasons. At the end of the conversation I would ask, ‘Do you have any other comments you would like to make?’ or ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ This became the part where I had to think on my feet… or on the phone as the case may be. It was up to me to decide whether the tenant’s further comments should be actioned and then to pass their information on to the relevant person. At these points I did feel a sense of responsibility for the tenant and for the information they had presented me with. I did my best to put them in contact with the right people; this could range from anyone in licencing, to recycling, to community safety. One tenant I remember specifically wanted to talk to someone about the drug problem on his road; I gave the tenant’s information to the Safer Estates Officer who went to visit the tenant and discuss the issues. Although there was limited scope for me to contribute to more complex council projects, sitting in on meetings and listening to others discussing how issues should be approached allowed me to understand the kind of problems the council faces and how problem solving as a team is an important aspect to developing both the area and tenant experience while also helping to get things done in the best way for the council.

I enjoyed a staff management task I was given. Managers at Stroud District Council oversee Supported Housing Officers who work off site. Currently 3 staff work as full time cover for staff at 29 supported housing schemes. I was given the task of planning how cover should be organised over the next month. I aimed to share the cover work equally between the 3 cover staff and also had to think about locations. Some were required to oversee 3 schemes over the course of 1 day. This gave me a flavour of staff management, and about how managers have a responsibility for the pressure they apply to their staff, I can see how easy it is to distribute work without following up on how a particularly pressurised week affects staff. Creating a staff rota may seem a small job for a manager but if its impact is negative, the implications can be much more serious. This highlighted to me the importance of communication with all staff and how important it will be in my future roles to maintain good communication with my colleagues to achieve what I need to within my role and also to achieve things as a team.

I spent time with the Empty Homes and Repairs team, an integral part of Tenant Services, but not an area I had considered working in before. This team deal with maintenance and building works, for example when a home becomes vacant, the first person to visit the site is an Empty Homes Officer; they make an assessment of the property and decide on the works that need to be completed before the house is suitable for the next tenants to move in. There are cases where the house is in a particularly poor condition and needs extensive attention. The officer decides on the most cost effective and efficient way of achieving this as the sooner new tenants are ‘in’ the sooner the council receive rental income from that property. One property I visited with an Empty Homes Officer was a real shock for me to see, the tenant had recently deceased, and with no family to clear the property this job was left for council, the owner had been very ill for some time before he died, however the whole house was in such a state. This case in particular made me think about where social problems begin and where responsibility lies. I realise that I find it easier to apply analytical thinking to real life situations rather than the broader facts and figures, this has confirmed to me that I would love a career where you ‘see’ the end result so to speak, where because of changes you have helped to provide an individual’s life takes a more positive long term course.

I also think I showed a willingness to be flexible in my work, as a matter of course I wanted to take the opportunities I was presented with over my time on this placement. This did mean staying an hour or so later than normal on a few occasions. Once for a residents meeting and once to attend an off site visit. During my week with Supported Housing I also drove myself to schemes in unfamiliar areas to meet the on site Supported Housing Officers. During my placement I think the ability to do things independently, and also complete tasks independently in the office added to my experience. I did complete some data based tasks (ie inputting) I think staff were pleased with my efficiency in completing these. At Stroud District Council, helping staff to maintain a healthy work – life balance is important. This is mostly achieved through flexitime. Staff keep their own time sheets, staff are trusted to spread their hours over the working week at their own discretion. I found that this system was highly valued by the staff. This working relationship with the employer works both ways, a flexible employer results in flexible staff and incentivises staff to remain committed to their role. This is something that differs to the kind of work I have done before (working shifts, doing a set job for the day then clocking off) I understand more now about taking full responsibility for the on-going work within your role.

Over my placement I also think I have improved my communication skills, both in talking with staff and organising what I would be completing with them over the following days and in talking to residents. Naturally I am fairly reserved and can be quiet, constantly meeting, working with and talking to new people pushed me to be more social than I perhaps otherwise would be. In this respect I think the placement has increased my self-confidence. For example, the first project work I contributed to involved calling tenants to collect profiling information, this involved asking some quite personal questions and initially was quite a daunting task but after a few goes I found my own way of collecting the information, keeping the resident at ease and making sure they were aware that they were not obliged to answer. Listening to residents was an essential part of these conversations, picking up on tone of voice and things unsaid to assess the way the conversation was going and altering my behaviour in response to this.

On a personal level my main achievement was finding level ground with people I would not normally be in contact with. I have learnt more about myself and found that my approach when dealing with residents was quite a personal one. Of course professionalism must be upheld, however, in making the contact with the resident work for both parties, you become more accountable to each other. If residents feel that… yes the council do want the best for me and they are responsive to my needs then the resident is more likely to be helpful when the council require something of them. I have a fair amount of customer service experience from my jobs in retail but as housing is such an integral part of everyday life I have found that ‘service’ in the housing sector differs greatly, the social housing contract is something that both parties have to work to maintain, ie responsibility does not fall solely on the shoulders of the service provider as it does in retail.

For me this work experience placement has been my first taster of an area of work I am genuinely interested in. Spending 3 days with each department gave me a good understanding of the roles within Tenant Services and also how this department works in partnership with so many other organisations; from Social Services to the Judicial Service and also with smaller local organisations to provide the best service they can for their residents. From talking to people I’ve also learnt a lot about both the private and public sector Housing Authorities. My next step will be to gain work experience in a private housing association. I am also hoping to volunteer for Chapter 1, an organisation that provide accommodation and support services to the homeless, victims of domestic abuse and are involved in social enterprises. I have put in my application and hope to start in the near future. This is highly relevant as it would give me more direct experience of working with people in more vulnerable situations; something which is important to me as a part of my long term career aspirations.