

auditors.www

Report on the Westcountry Housing Plymouth Office reception area

Background information

The audit commission inspection of Westcountry Housing last year recommended that, as the Plymouth Office is open to the public to drop-in, access to it should be altered to be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.

The Resident Auditor team were given information about the likely costs of the necessary alteration works and details of a variety of alternative options available. They were also given details of the number of visitors there had been to the office over a six week period.

The auditors were asked to mystery shop the Plymouth office reception area. To comment on the quality of both the building and the service received and to make recommendations about how Westcountry should proceed.

The Report

Getting to the office

The Plymouth office is accessible by public transport via a 15 minute bus ride from Plymouth City Centre. There is approximately a 5 minute walk from the bus stop to the office. Staff were able to give accurate information about bus times and numbers and clear directions to the office.

There is adequate parking space at the office and disabled spaces are available. The office is close to the A38 and again staff were able to give clear directions to the building.

Exterior and approach

The entrance to the building was found to be poor. The ramp to the front door has a slight lip and could only be used from the end; sides were not sloped for a wheelchair to use.

The front door is not automatic and the door bell is not at wheelchair height. The front door is very heavy and difficult to push and door frame is narrow making it difficult for anyone using a wheelchair or with a pushchair to get through.

Inside the reception area

The reception area is too small to use for anything other than greeting at reception. The area is far too small for a wheelchair/pushchair to be accommodated comfortably.

Due to the lack of space there are only two low chairs in reception, neither of which had arms making them difficult for anyone with mobility difficulties to use. There is no table area in the reception area where residents can make notes or complete forms.

Fire exits did not appear to be clearly signposted.

There is no space in the reception area to have a confidential conversation. Although the resident auditors were offered the use of the interview room it was noted that should this have been unavailable e.g. in use for a booked appointment then there was no available space to meet with some-one who had dropped in unplanned.

The interview room itself had appropriate furniture and was clean, and light. However there are a number of filing cabinets in the room which did not make the room feel welcoming and friendly. The auditors also noted that they could clearly hear the conversations of staff in the main office. The door through from the interview room to the main office automatically locked as staff left the auditors alone. This was not explained to them and they were made to feel quite uncomfortable. They were also given no advice as to what to do in the event of a fire or other emergency.

Other facilities

The toilet facilities are very good, although there is no toilet sign on the door from reception to the hallway. There was no evidence of any baby changing facilities.

There is a good interactive table in reception for children

Information available

Leaflets appeared accessible, well organised, appropriate and up to date. Posters were clear and easy to see.

The service provided

All staff were very polite, friendly and helpful.

The Housing Officer who answered the auditor's queries was very knowledgeable and went out of her way to provide phone numbers and web details to assist them. She offered lots of appropriate and accurate advice.

Summary and Recommendations

All staff the Resident Auditors came into contact with at the Plymouth office were very polite and knowledgeable about their subject. The staff clearly do their best to help visitors; however they are hindered by the fact that the reception area is far too small and cramped.

There is adequate parking at the office and it is also accessible by public transport but this is only really possible for anyone with easy access to Plymouth city centre as this is where the bus leaves from. Access from further afield is time consuming and expensive.

The physical access to the building makes it virtually impossible for a wheelchair user to access the building and would make access for anyone with a pushchair or pram extremely difficult.

The limited space means that the office can only offer one confidential space making it, in theory, difficult to manage 'drop-in' visits. Even if access to the building were improved the space currently available within the office itself is so limited that it is difficult to envisage this every being a useable and resident friendly reception area.

The resident auditors were extremely impressed with the friendliness and helpfulness of the all staff and the quality of the advice and information given to them. The auditors consider this to be of the utmost importance to residents and are reassured that whatever changes are made to the office the service provided to residents will still be of the highest standard. Considering the wide geographical area covered by the office and the relative difficulty of getting to it for anyone outside of Plymouth the resident auditors support the policy of staff visiting residents in their own home wherever possible.

With this in mind and taking into account the high cost of adapting the physical access and the inappropriate space available inside the building the resident auditor recommend that the Plymouth office is closed to residents to 'drop-in' but that the minor adaptations listed below are made to enable residents to attend meetings and pre booked appointments at the office if it is inappropriate to meet elsewhere.

Recommended changes

Lip on ramp is cemented smooth

Doorbell lowered to wheelchair height

Receptionist to greet / sign-in wheelchair users from resident's side (not over counter)

Higher chair with arms replaces one of the lower chairs in reception area

Make baby changing facilities available

Fire exits and toilets are clearly signed

Sound proofing in interview room is improved

Filing cabinets from interview room are moved elsewhere

Security arrangements / fire escapes are clearly explained to visitors to the office.