

Report

Report subject : Access to Council Services in Rural Areas and for Extended Hours

Report to : Cabinet

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Cabinet Member for Resources : Councillor Don Culver

1. Introduction:

The core council information points are located in Salisbury, Amesbury and Mere, where customers are used to obtaining detailed information and service provision from Customer Service Officers. Within the Improving Customer Services priority of the council there has been a clear remit to extend provision of service to rural areas and to extend opening hours for all customers. This report

- outlines the outcome of the pilot of peripatetic clinics in Downton, Wilton and Tisbury
- outlines service provision in Amesbury and Mere
- Summarises feedback and research regarding rural service provision
- recommends further opportunities to improve access to affordable and effective services for customers in rural areas
- recommends opportunities to extend opening hours for access to telephone service for all customers

2. Peripatetic Clinics

In September 2005 the council introduced peripatetic clinics to extend access to services into three of the community areas. These services were aimed to provide access to customers who found it difficult to access council services by phone, letter, or visit to existing offices in Salisbury, Amesbury or Mere. The clinics were established in Downton, Tisbury and Wilton, and were promoted locally by extensive advertising, use of flyers, and information direct to known customers. Each clinic ran for two hours, once a week, and was manned by a Customer Service Officer who was able to help customers with a wide range of council queries, including:

- Revenues and Benefits enquiries
- Wisecard applications
- Requests for environmental services
- General council enquiries
- Leisure and tourism information
- Current local plans
- Concessionary Fares



Awarded in:
Housing Services
Waste and Recycling Services



An interim review in June 2006 summarised the take-up:

2.1. Downton (Southern Area)

This area has a population of over 21,000, with a higher than average percentage of older people, and just under 10% of the population on low incomes. Most of the area is remote from Salisbury, and the dispersed settlement pattern means that many live closer to small towns in Hampshire than to Salisbury. The clinic in Downton is well established, and has a regular customer base, most of whom are elderly. The service is popular, and provides services such as concessionary fares, benefits and housing advice, general council queries. Annual cost of the clinic will be £3354 (plus on-costs).

2.2. Tisbury (Nadder Valley Community Area)

This area has a population of just over 7000, with a higher than average percentage of older people, and just under 10% of the population on low incomes. Take up of the new service has been consistently low in Tisbury, with very few customers. Extensive marketing and word-of-mouth communication has failed to improve the customer base. Annual cost of the clinic is £4332 (plus on-costs). No overall savings to be accrued, as pilot service not currently funded.

2.3. Wilton (Four Rivers)

This area has a population of just over 10,000, 1/3rd of which live in Wilton. This area has a higher than average percentage of unemployment for Wiltshire, and lower than average car ownership. However despite extensive promotion and marketing take up of the new service has been very low. Annual cost of the clinic is £3101 (plus on-costs). No overall savings to be accrued, as pilot service not currently funded.

2.4. Summary

The council's original objectives for the peripatetic clinics were to provide service to the "hard to reach"; defined as those who struggle to resolve their council business using the telephone or who are unable to travel to other locations by reason of age, disability or personal circumstances. However take up of service in Wilton and Tisbury was consistently low, and the pilot did not furnish evidence of a demand. It is acknowledged that this may in part be due to the availability of suitable premises; neither Tisbury nor Wilton having found premises that strongly matched our criteria for access.

The average cost of providing service to one person in Tisbury is about £60, in Wilton £40, and in Downton, £12. Pennyfarthing House customer service costs, by comparison, are £1.46 per customer. The service to Tisbury and Wilton was suspended from July in response to staffing shortages, in order to prioritise resource on the core telephone service provided by the contact centre.

3. Amesbury and Mere

The existing Information Points in Amesbury and Mere forms a valuable part of the Council's service to rural areas, and are well used by customers, both visitors and phone enquiries. Mere handles an average of 910 queries per month, and Amesbury, 550. Amesbury shows a greater variation in monthly figures, associated with a sharp rise in tourism enquiries in the summer months. However both Information Points are now providing a substantial range of council services to local residents. Following the move into the Library in Amesbury, a successful Open Day was held in April to promote the service.

4. Additional Consultation and Research

4.1. Intelligence Network

The Intelligence Network - www.intelligencenetwork.org.uk holds a wide range of information and consultation results relating to Wiltshire citizens, it includes work from Community Planning, People's Network and Census information. A survey entitled "Strengthening Communities in Rural Areas" produced a report called "Rural Facilities Report (Salisbury District)" in October 2005. This asked people in rural areas to prioritise the top four services that should be available in rural areas. The top three of these were bus services, affordable housing for local people and village police constables, with over 68% of the respondents including these in the top four. Only 3% of respondents included a "One Stop council office" in their top four. It is likely that this figure

was slightly depressed by a lack of awareness of what such a facility could provide, but still clear that this remains a low area of priority for rural communities.

4.2. Other Agencies

Both the Pensions Service and Citizen's Advice Bureaux run peripatetic clinics in rural areas. These are located at Amesbury, Mere and Tisbury – at which the Council also has a successful customer information points. CAB also trialled a service in Barford St Martin, which was withdrawn due to lack of service take-up.

4.3. Customer Service ad hoc feedback

Customer Service officers have collated ad hoc feedback from customers both to the rural clinics and to our established offices in Salisbury, Amesbury and Mere. Customers in Downton have provided consistently positive feedback, using the service to obtain quick responses to a range of services and enquiries. Comments include “it is nice to have service in the village” and that “something a bit extra for Downton” is welcomed. Other feedback suggests that many customers prefer to contact the council at its existing offices, often combining this trip with access to other facilities in Mere, Amesbury or Salisbury, and feeling confident that at these offices they will be dealt with by a more knowledgeable officer. This is in fact erroneous, as the same staff provide cover at all locations, but reflects current customer opinion nonetheless. There has been no formal survey of rural customers, and these comments have all been collected during the course of Customer Service duties. Formal consultation would require separate funding, and was not therefore part of this work. It is also recognised that the existing services would benefit from promotion, and this forms a key recommendation to this report.

4.4. Parish Councils

Both Tisbury and Wilton Parish Councils were contacted in July, outlining the low demand and high resource required to provide service to the rural clinics. Tisbury responded with the following statement: “This was discussed by Tisbury Parish Councillors on Tuesday 4th July; the discussion concluding that such a clinic, if not being sufficiently used, should be abandoned quickly.”

4.5. Wiltshire County Council

Enquiries to the County Council Accessibility Officers have been made and followed up, but to date no response has been received.

5. Wiltshire County Council Mobile Library Service

A number of local authorities provide information points via their mobile library network. A good example is the East Riding of Yorkshire, where a large rural population is connected to council services via the mobile library network using wireless technology and buses that have been designed to allow customers to browse on-line services, video conference to Customer Service officers, and assistance, on the bus, with a range of application and service request forms. In order to facilitate this the East Riding revised the entire timetable for its mobile library network so that each stop was of 2 – 3 hours duration, giving time for all customers to utilise the services available. One of the recommendations from this report is that SDC submit a proposal to the Customer First Partnership for joint working to explore the potential of the mobile library network to investigate opportunities for enhancing service provision to residents of rural areas.

6. Digital Challenge

Following the Government's announcement of the Digital Challenge in April this year, a small SDC working group put together a proposal based on the provision of additional community PCs in existing rural locations, such as local shops, surgeries. Using readily available technology these PCs would enable customers to log on to access council services with on-line support, known as “co-browsing”. Co-browsing allows any customer to the SDC web-pages to ring a Customer Service Officer (CSO) for on-line help in understanding how to access services on line. The CSO would talk to the customer, while sharing the same screen of information, and could point and click the mouse for the customer, help with filling in on-line forms, generally providing enough assistance to help customers familiarise themselves with accessing service electronically. The eventual bid for Digital Challenge money was co-ordinated by Kennet District Council, and was based on a different proposal. However co-browsing remains an option for both providing additional computer access points in rural areas, and, critically,

helping customers learn confidence in accessing on-line service. At present this proposal is unfunded, however there are opportunities to work with Development Services on a broader proposal that would also enable enhanced remote working for Planning Officers. A budgeted proposal is due to be submitted to the e-Governance Board in the autumn.

7. Scrutiny Resources Panel

This panel received a verbal report on rural service provision on 11th September 2006, and agreed:

- 7.1. That the proposal for the provision of customer services to the rural areas via the mobile library service should be pursued and support for this proposal also be sought from Wiltshire County Council.
- 7.2. That in light of the “co-browsing” proposal outlined by the Head of Customer Services, the Panel would be interested to learn how the proposal currently being investigated by Development Services progresses.

8. Extended Telephone Opening Hours

This section covers access to those core council services that are currently only available within conventional office hours. These include all the services currently delivered through Customer Services, plus those outlined for future integration in the council’s Customer Access Strategy. It does not cover the facilities, leisure centres or the council’s existing 24/7 helpline operated by the Control Centre.

Following market research in September 2003 it was clear that while customers were in favour of extended opening hours to access council services, this should be proportionate to need, and should not be reflected in an increase in council tax.

Cabinet subsequently agreed the Customer Access Strategy, which sets out an aim to introduce extended hours for the telephone service of one evening per week until 7pm and Saturday mornings.

Similarly, the Customer Focus inspection, undertaken by the Audit Commission in May 2005, stated that:

Customer access in a number of respects is currently weak. The range of council offices is confusing for customers; opening hours and facilities are not always customer friendly and the council is recommended to progress plans to adopt more customer focussed opening hours.

8.1. Current Position

Opening hours for access to service are currently varied across the range of office and services offered by the council. For example:

- Mere Information Centre is open from 9.00 am – 5.00 pm (7.00 pm on Monday evenings), and on Saturday mornings from 9.00 – 12 noon
- Amesbury Information Centre also operates on Saturday mornings
- Bourne Hill and Pennyfarthing House are open from 8.30 am – 5.00 Mon - Fri
- Planning Services in Wyndham Road opens from 9.00 am– 5.00 pm Mon - Fri
- Housing Services in Endless Street opens from 9.00 am - 5.00 pm Mon – Thurs, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm Fridays

A similarly complex picture emerges for the telephone:

The main council switchboard is open from 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday, but some service units do not routinely man their lines until 9.00 am, and others offer only a reduced service after 4.00 pm on a Friday. The out of hours emergency housing rota starts at 5.00 pm every weekday, which means that customers ringing between 4.00 pm – 5.00 pm on a Friday may well not be answered. Individual services have different times published on the web. Customers calling the Mere Information Office will be able to speak to a Customer Service Officer until 7.00 pm on a Monday evening, as well as on Saturday mornings in both Amesbury and Mere.

Unsurprisingly, these variations can be very confusing for the customer – and do not help the council in its aspiration to ensure equal standards of and access to services.

8.2. Proposal

Plans to extend opening hours for customer service by phone need to ensure that costs are proportionate to demand; it would be neither efficient nor effective to increase the number of specialist and technical officers employed by the council to cover extended opening hours. Our current commitment, as stated in the corporate Customer Care Charter, states:

If technical/specialist advice is required, and no member of staff is available, then an appointment will be made for you as soon as possible

As the integration of new services into the Customer Service Unit proceeds, it will be the case that Customer Service Officers are able to resolve an increasing % of queries. Those that cannot be resolved will be passed to other officers for resolution, or an appointment made.

It is therefore proposed that, subject to the proposed implementation timetable for Golden Numbers in June 2007 (see separate paper to this Cabinet), and adequate data transfer speeds to core council systems, a pilot for extended telephone opening hours using staff already on duty in the Amesbury and Mere offices commence from October 2007. The quality of service provided should be equivalent to that that can be reasonably expected during core hours. This means that Customer Service Officers (CSO) would aim to resolve 80% of queries at the first point of contact. In addition to the technical requirements to enable calls to be handled in Amesbury and Mere, this will require:

- CSO access to comprehensive, reliable web-based information
- CSO access to and training in processes and systems needed to resolve 80% of customer queries
- Assessment of degree of specialism – “Is it reasonable to expect an officer from a specialist/technical discipline to be available on call?”
- Assessment of customer demand – e.g. Tradesmen’s waivers are only requested early in the day
- Development of CRM and processes to forward requests to other officers
- CSO ability to book appointments for customers

This pilot would enable the council to assess actual requirements for extended telephone opening hours, prior to office centralisation, when it is anticipated that the new contact centre in Salisbury will also provide extended opening hours. This service would provide access to and resolution of the range of services agreed in the Customer Access Strategy, maintaining the target of 80% resolution at the first point of contact.

9. Recommendations:

- 9.1. CF Partnership to include review of opportunities for joint service delivery via mobile libraries
- 9.2. Downton clinic to be maintained, with budget provision as outlined in the Customer Service Integration 2006 – 08 paper to October Cabinet
- 9.3. Tisbury and Wilton Clinics to be formally closed down
- 9.4. Improve promotion of Downton, Mere and Amesbury service to adjacent parishes
- 9.5. Approve work to prepare for extended telephony opening hours in Amesbury and Mere in October 2007
- 9.6. Investigate the potential of co-browsing utilising the infrastructure work within the Development Services project, or if this is not feasible, by seeking an external source of approximately £20K funding to enable a pilot at three locations for one year.

Implications:

Financial : The overall effect of all changes to the cost of customer services is contained elsewhere on the agenda. In addition, this report identifies a requirement for sum of £20,000 non recurring revenue (9.6) that will either be met from an existing budget or from external funding sources. Therefore this report does not have any direct effect on the Council's finances.

Legal & Human Rights: None

Personnel : CSU employment contracts issued from August 2005 unequivocally identify likely need for late night working and Saturday morning working subject to detailed discussion with individuals as the need becomes a reality. Earlier CSU contracts are less explicit but actions were identified to rectify the situation. The unit has confirmed that employees within that unit understand and are committed to the need to implement these arrangements according to the recommendations within this paper. Trades Unions will need to be involved in further discussions in relation to this matter.

It has always been open to Managers to offer employment contracts which provide for work pattern flexibility. The recent Innovative Ways of Working initiative provides policies and guidance to help managers identify needs within their work areas and either to encourage current employees to move to working patterns suited to extended opening hours and/or to recruit new members on the understanding that they move directly to these new arrangements.

The flexibility embedded in employment contracts relating to employees in units other than customer services varies. Early employment contracts tend to be specific about working times and days. More recent contracts do not specify hours of work and refers to the fact that our flexible working hours scheme allows an officer some discretion in arranging working time. Whilst this is an improvement on previous arrangements, a review of the council's basic contract of employment and variations required for specific working environments needs to be conducted to ensure the council's ability to implement working arrangements according to the needs of the business is sufficiently robust.

It is worth noting, however, that whatever the contract says, if employees have been working in a specific work pattern for a considerable period of time without variation, it would be difficult to enforce change on the individual without discussion and agreement. Accordingly, advice would always be to undertake a full programme of consultation with employees and trades unions prior to changed working patterns being introduced.

Management Team consider there to be a need for a project to be undertaken next year on a corporate approach to flexible contracts for all staff.

The introduction of the Innovative Ways of Working Project has impacted on our Agreement with the trades unions in respect of our Flexible Working Policy. The need to review this policy is agreed and has been planned into our Policy and Procedures Review Project led by the Employee Relations Team.

Premium and Overtime arrangements are currently under discussion with the trades unions. Final agreement has not yet been reached but it is hoped that agreed changes will beneficially affect costs in relation to extended hours services. It is not possible, however, to say how at this point in time.

Community Safety : None.
Environmental : None.
Wards Affected : All