

Review of Mobile Customer Information Service November 2009

1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to review the effectiveness of the Mobile Information Service and to recommend any improvements for the future.

2. BACKGROUND

The Mobile Customer Information Service (MCIS) was introduced in June 2007 to deliver a face-to-face Chelmsford Borough Council Information Service into rural and outlying areas of the Chelmsford Borough, and to promote Council services to residents in these areas. We are aware that, for a number of older residents and those with young families or limited transport options, attending the Civic Centre to access services can be a problem.

A review of the service delivery and effectiveness was undertaken in September 2008 within which recommendations were made for an action plan. Following on from that review, the below addresses each action point from the 2008 report, highlighting where progress has been made in each area in order to reflect the current situation.

3. REVIEW OF ACTION PLAN

Increase frequency of visits

Visit regularity and attendance times have been reviewed so that all are consistent. A regular monthly presence is maintained at all locations, and enough time is allowed for customers to be comfortably dealt with whilst simultaneously ensuring staff 'out of office' time is kept to a minimum. The majority of locations retain the same day of the week each month for sessions, to further maintain regularity; Galleywood, however, is the exception, as the service operates alongside the existing Village Market event which varies in weekday each month.

We have continued to visit the 'One Stop' in Melbourne twice monthly as this is an area of deprivation with a higher perceived need for our services.

Increase publicity

Maximum awareness of the service amongst customers is necessary in order to attain optimum value and effectiveness in the service delivery, thus publicity is crucial for the success of the service. Visits for all locations are advertised in local newspapers, the CBC intranet and website, the Life publication and Focus magazine as often as possible.

Publicity for the MCIS has been increased since 2008; all churches in the relevant locations were notified to promote and communicate the service to their internal and external groups, and leaflet drops / flyers are available within local shops and post offices in each location in order to reach a wider audience. Additional local newsletters and magazines have also been added to the distribution list this year.

Change some locations

The service for Galleywood was relocated to an alternative venue during 2009 as the area originally utilised within the Library delivered low customer levels. The service for Galleywood is now delivered at Keene Hall alongside the Village Market, which has raised customer enquiry numbers considerably from 4 or 5 to 40 plus per visit. This is also the case for the Melbourne 'one stop' venue, which was relocated from the Pavilion to the Post Office at the end of 2008 and consequently has seen an increase to levels of usage similar to that of Galleywood as a result.

All visits during 2009 were co-ordinated to ensure they ran alongside an organised club or event at the venue; this has aided the service in targeting optimum audience numbers within an effective time slot. Costs are also kept to a minimum through this technique as the service is able to utilise the venue without incurring a hire charge fee. Session duration has been reduced to 1.5 hours for all locations except Galleywood and Boreham, where sessions extend to 2 hours as the service operates alongside a village market.

In order to address the issue of low customer levels at Good Easter during 2008, the service now operates alongside a group for senior citizens, the Monday Club, where visitor numbers have somewhat increased in comparison to last year's figures, however remain low relative to other locations.

Disappointingly, visitor numbers at the Highwood location were too low to achieve a sufficient level of value from the service; after consultation with the Parish Council, the service was withdrawn from the Highwood area in March. Members were informed of this development, and consequently Rettendon was identified as a particular area of need; service delivery began in Rettendon during May 2009.

Consider expanding services offered

We have experienced positive results with regard to partner organisations introducing their presence alongside the service sessions; Essex Police PCSOs now regularly attend the majority of venues when police duties permit, and the Essex Fire & Rescue Service have increasingly participated at the 'one stop' session in Melbourne on several occasions as a result of the new venue, as well as attending sessions at other locations on a more sporadic basis.

Also now included in the 'one stop' at Melbourne are the Chelmsford Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and the Mid Essex Primary Care Trust (PCT), who have been present at a number of visits and display enthusiasm to maintain this presence at future sessions. CBC Service areas, including Sports Development, Planning and Environmental Services, are now also regularly utilising the MCIS as a consultation tool for delivering and promoting their services.

In addition, a new partnership is being explored with the newly appointed Village Agents; this is discussed in more detail below in 'Future Actions'.

Consider extending the geographical coverage of the service

In order to address the issue regarding the lack of service provision within rural eastern areas of the Chelmsford Borough, the Mobile Customer Information Service has now been extended to include to locations of Boreham (3,500 residents) and Bicknacre (3,000 residents). Ideas for

further expansion into the Danbury area (5,000 residents) have been discontinued due to lack of internet access; however, Bicknacre is the closest location neighbouring Danbury.

Reduce number of staff

As a result of increased partner organisations and operating the service alongside existing clubs and events, we are now able to send only one Customer Service Officer instead of two to deliver the MCIS. This cost-effective development has had a positive impact on the value of the service, as resources and therefore costs have been reduced.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the MCIS has made much progress and development moving forward throughout 2009. The number of visits has increased from 44 in 2008 to 109 in 2009 across 10 locations, and the number of enquiries has risen significantly from 511 in 2008, to 1806 in 2009. These figures represent a 44% increase in enquiries per visit and demonstrate a positive result from efforts to heighten awareness and the consistency of the service.

Prominent successes over the year include the new venues at the Galleywood and Melbourne locations which boast high enquiry numbers; high customer levels have also been identified at sessions in Runwell and West Hanningfield.

The service continues to be well received by our citizens and we regularly receive positive feedback, particularly from those with limited mobility. It clearly demonstrates that the access to face to face services is highly valued amongst some parts of the community.

It will be important to continue to closely monitor the cost of providing this service to ensure that it provides good value for money. We will also carry on exploring the opportunities to work more closely with partner organisations to minimise the costs to the Council.

5. FUTURE ACTIONS

Essex Libraries

We are currently investigating the possibility of working collaboratively with mobile and static libraries throughout the borough. This could be a useful strategy to target higher numbers and wider groups of customers to offer our services. A meeting was held with the Chelmsford Group Manager for Essex Libraries, Charles Harvey, in a bid to create these links. Static and mobile library locations have been identified and compared with MCIS venues in attempt to recognise any geographical gaps. If forming these links with the libraries is a success, then the issue of delivering service provision to areas where access has proved more difficult could be addressed.

The Village Agents

During 2009 Essex County Council commenced a pilot scheme to provide Village Agents (VAs) in 3 locations in the Borough. The project is to provide isolated or disadvantaged older people in rural communities with easier access to information and services across a range of partner organisations. However, no other disadvantaged or isolated people will be excluded from receiving Village Agent assistance. Village Agents will be responsible for signposting local residents to a range of services and information sources that are able to provide the right help,

advice and support in effect joining up services for older people in rural areas and identifying any unmet needs in the local community.

There is a clear correlation between these activities and those of the MCIS so we have started to develop a partnership with the VAs. It is unclear at the moment whether the VAs will direct residents to the MCIS for further information or whether they will offer more of an advisory service themselves. It is possible that if the Agents are very active at signposting Council services that this may reduce the need for the MCIS in some areas; this could prove very beneficial in some rural areas where the population is particularly sparse and scattered making the MCIS less effective. Meetings have taken place with the Village Agents in order to offer basic training and to facilitate their familiarisation with CBC services; the Village Agents have also been encouraged to attend one of the MCIS visits to further the integration process.

Melbourne Venue Change

Once the refurbishment of the ground floor of Parkside is complete there will be an opportunity to deliver the service from this location. The advantage of this would be better facilities, with some private meeting rooms for use with Housing or Benefit cases however it is anticipated that we would also try to maintain a presence in the Post Office as this has proved to be such a successful venue for reaching our customers.

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