

Cabinet – 18 March 2009

The Provision of Council Services through Post Offices

Portfolio: Councillor Garry Perry, Communities & Partnerships

Service: Neighbourhoods – Customer Contact

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary of Report

At its meeting of 3 November 2008 council resolved to “call on officers to investigate and report to cabinet what council services could be provided through the post office network in Walsall borough to further improve our engagement with local people and the resource implications of adopting such a policy”. This report sets out how the post office network could assist the council in delivering local services.

2. Recommendation

That cabinet agrees in principle to the development of an informal partnership with the post office for the provision of information points in post offices and delegate responsibility to the Executive Director of Neighbourhood services for implementation.

3. Background information

- 3.1 Before making any decision on the provision of services through the post office network it is worth considering the aims and objectives of the council's customer access strategy. The strategy agreed by cabinet in January 2008 outlines our plans and objectives for improving resident's access to services with the aim of providing them with a choice of access that recognises their personal preference and circumstances.
- 3.2 Despite the telephone being the most popular means of access and the ever increasing use of on line services, face to face still remains the preferred and most convenient option for many.

- 3.3 Current face to face contact is primarily via the First Stop Shop (FSS) which receives over 300,000 enquiries per year. However efforts have and are continuing to be made to provide convenient access to residents at a more local level with an ambition to create a network of local access and information points.
- 3.4 Pressure on resources has prevented the council developing a network of local access points, staffed by trained customer service professionals. However in order to provide local access the council has agreed to the introduction of the new customer service bus the "First Stop Express" which went live in February 2009 and will visit locations across the borough on a weekly basis at designated times. Development of further local access points will very much depend on sourcing suitable accommodation in the right locations e.g. Bloxwich Library Theatre which has an access point incorporated into its design. Access points will also require a budget provision to provide for the staff and equipment needed to deliver the service.
- 3.5 Information points have recently been launched within a number of council libraries and while not providing as an extensive a range of services as local access points they will nevertheless provide local residents with a valuable first point of contact for basic services, provision of information and general signposting. These information points are capitalising on our existing library network which are already community focal points, they utilise the expertise of librarians who are provided with additional training and support by the FSS team. As we are using existing council buildings and staff this means no additional costs other than a small element for training and publicity.
- 3.6 Taking into account the above, the council would need to ensure that any use of post offices compliment rather than conflict with the strategy.
- 3.7 Using and promoting post offices as local access points would require both parties to invest the time and resource to ensure the appropriateness of the venue and that the level of service provided is both adequate and efficient to serve the customers needs.
- 3.8 Should we adopt the preferred approach of utilising FSS customer service staff the size and lay out of the buildings would need to be able to provide sufficient space for a dedicated customer service desk with access to relevant computer systems. It is likely that only the large district post offices, if any, would have scope to provide for the sort of space required.
- 3.9. Access points are expected to provide basic transactional services in addition to signposting and provision of information e.g. requests for a new bin, a report of fly tipping or applying for a disabled parking permit. As a result customer service advisors require a good understanding of the services involved and would require access to relevant systems and databases, this would create difficulties were we to try and utilise post office staff to deliver our services direct. Thought would need to be given to data protection issues with personal data being held in a location outside of council control and the implications of this information being lost or used inappropriately. Given the complexity and likely costs involved initial

discussions with post office representatives have identified this as the least favourable option available.

- 3.10 Developing post offices as information points would be far less complex than that of access points. Post offices already collect payments for council tax and National Domestic Rates which could conceivably be extended to include other council payments. They are also in the process of marketing new services which allow them to make payments to third parties or provide a validation service for key documents. Given access to the right tools and enablers they could play a key role in the provision of information and to assist in signposting customers to council services such as debt counselling, welfare rights or direct debit options.
- 3.11 Informal discussions held with representatives from Post Office Ltd have confirmed a willingness to discuss further the opportunities for providing a more joined approach to service delivery. The implementation of local access points was considered problematical for a variety of reasons however there was genuine interest expressed for the idea of developing information points within post offices utilising some of the systems and services already available.
- 3.12 Given sufficient space information points could be provided in post offices with a dedicated area set aside for leaflets, posters and contact details for key council and partner services. Telephone help lines and touch screen kiosks are established information channels used in both the public and private sector which could also be deployed to further enhance provision, however installing these would have both revenue and capital implications and it is difficult to predict how much usage this type of service might receive.
- 3.13 With access to the councils website post offices can access a raft of information but may need support from the council to enhance their knowledge of where to look for some of our key sources of data. The investment in training needed for PO staff would exceed that needed for librarians, as the latter are not only familiar with the workings of the council but by nature of their profession are used to storing and retrieving information quickly. The council would need to invest some officer time to help provide support, promote and champion the initiative. Further discussions would also be needed if PO staff were to require access to some of the councils systems and databases.
- 3.14 Essex County Council is currently pioneering a new approach by using local funding to secure the future of some its local branches. However this innovative approach is requiring them to invest £1.5m over three years and it remains to be seen if this will prove sustainable or that the post offices in question will ever become self sufficient. The council is hoping to receive money from the government's social network fund. However this can not be guaranteed and there are plans for government to review its subsidy arrangements in 2011.
- 3.15 One London Borough Council is also considering the feasibility of providing post office counter services in some of its libraries. Should they adopt this approach, it will be worth monitoring its progress to see if this might be an option for future inclusion in our own customer access strategy.

4. Resource considerations

4.1 Financial:

Depending on the agreed approach the cost of implementing information points should be minimal. However officer time would be involved in working with the post offices to create and implement a workable model. There may also be some minor costs associated with training, support and implementation of ICT solutions if required. Should any resulting proposals require additional funding then these requirements would have to be identified as part of the 2010/11 budget setting process and subject to the necessary approvals.

4.2 Legal:

Depending on the approach taken work may need to be undertaken by the relevant parties to draft a suitable service level agreement. Such a document would be able to outline what was expected from each party e.g. service standards, equipment, data protection, resource requirements, provision of training etc. This would provide a clear statement of intent, outline the desired outcomes and objectives and protect the interests of both organisations. Legal services should be able to provide further clarity on the format such a document needs to take and any additional legal requirements that need to be considered at the appropriate stage.

4.3 Staffing:

An access point would require a minimum of 1FTE to cover conventional opening hours and an allowance would also need to be made to enable cover to be provided for holidays and possible sickness. The benefit of utilising staff from the FSS pool is that they would be fully trained to handle customer enquiries and performance could be managed through our existing frameworks. Any proposal will need to consider the impact on existing staff resources. Apart from staff time as part of their development, information points should not require any dedicated staff resource.

5. Citizen Impact

The provision of Information points in post offices would improve residents access to basic information and advice.

6. Community safety

Nothing relating to this report.

7. Environmental impact

Information points in post offices would help reduce the need for residents to travel to obtain basic information and advice.

8. Performance and risk management issues

8.1 **Risk:** Any proposals or pilot schemes would be subject to a project risk assessment.

8.2 **Performance management:** Any projects or pilot schemes would be delivered as part of the councils improving the customer experience programme and regular reports on progress and performance would be made to the relevant programme board. Appropriate measures would be put in place to evaluate take up and customer satisfaction including the ability to provide first time resolution (NI14)

9. Equality implications

No impact as a result of this report although an equality impact assessment maybe required subject to any subsequent actions undertaken.

10. Consultation

Initial discussions have taken place with managers from some of our key front line services as well as representatives from the post office.

Background papers

None

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9 March 2009



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