

26th November 2009

Evaluation and Impact of the First Stop Express

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr G Perry Communities and Partnerships

Summary of report:

This report provides detail of the findings from an initial 6 month pilot undertaken by the First Stop Express (FSE), customer service mobile. It summarises the outcomes, key learning points and customer feedback/perceptions and outlines the proposed next steps for developing the service, increasing take up and improving customer access to council services and information.

Recommendations

To note the contents of this report, support the promotion of a revised timetable for 2010 and to monitor progress with a further progress report to be provided to this scrutiny panel in June 2010

Background papers:

None

Reason for scrutiny:

A report was presented to Neighbourhood services scrutiny panel on 28th January 2008 outlining the aims and objectives of the FSE and to seek feedback on the proposed locations and services to be provided. As part of the project plan it was agreed that the new service would undertake a six month pilot period prior to an initial evaluation and that the outcomes and findings of this evaluation be reported to scrutiny and performance panel along with the proposed next steps.

Resource and legal considerations:

The FSE has a revenue budget which covers the cost of a customer service driver, maintenance and any marketing costs.

The FSE requires an experienced customer service advisor, sourced from the First Stop Shop pool, to accompany the driver on a rotational basis. However the First Stop Shop has been subjected to a number of budget cuts over the last two years resulting in the loss of a team leader post. This is now impacting on the ability of

the team to maintain and improve the levels of service which it has set. Further budget cuts proposed for 2010/11 will impact on the ability to market and staff this service.

Citizen impact:

The Councils vision to improve local access to services and its responsibilities under the duty to involve scheme is placing even greater emphasis on the need for community engagement. The FSE will provide citizens across the borough with convenient local access to face to face advice and information on council and partner services as well as a location for providing feedback on community needs and issues.

Environmental impact:

None directly attached to this report although the provision of this service will reduce the need for unnecessary journeys to the town centre and if utilised appropriately can help raise public awareness of environmental issues

Performance management:

Scrutiny will ensure that members are briefed on progress of this service while providing an opportunity for officers to communicate customer feedback, highlighting any particular issues or areas of concern, helping to shape future service delivery and inform the decision making process.

Equality Implications:

Impact assessment undertaken

- The customer service bus is a mobile unit which provides improved accessibility of council services to local residents and customers across the borough.
- As the service is mobile it will “stop” at designated sites across the borough. These are planned for each ward and have been considered favourable for access, areas having an above average elderly population and/or minority ethnic community, areas of economic inactivity.
- The customer service bus will provide access for customers who may have physical disabilities and are unable to visit static council offices.
- Interpretation and translation maybe required and this service will be available to users, when needed.

Consultation:

A survey of users and non users has been undertaken and customer feedback and comments are captured at all sites as well as via a citizen stakeholder forum held on April 21st 2009

Contact Officer:

Jez Holding – Customer Contact manager

 01922 652526

holdingj@walsall.gov.uk

1. Report

1.1 Objective

The First Stop Express (FSE) was introduced in response to the councils need to provide improved access to its services at a more local level and to support its long term aims and vision.

While the telephone remains the preferred channel of contact for most people a large proportion of the public still require or have preference for face to face access. The first stop shop currently receives over 300k visitors per year a number of whom have to travel into the town centre from outlying areas of the borough, for some this can be both expensive and inconvenient

The option of providing satellite offices would prove extremely costly and the express provides a more cost effective means of providing a local first point of contact for customer enquiries.

The aim of the vehicle is to provide a mini First Stop Shop facility with access to a range of council services which can be developed to include advice and information from partner agencies such as the health authority, police and fire services.

The express also provides an appropriately branded mobile for promoting new schemes and initiatives, and obtaining customer feedback from all areas of the borough.

1.2 Design and Build

Given that the FSE was a fairly new concept preparing a design and specification was not easy as our fleet Services had no previous experience of procuring this type of vehicle.

We were assisted however by Coventry City Council who have a similar vehicle which had been in operation for about 12 months and they were extremely helpful in sharing with us their own specification as well as some key learning points and experiences from their project.

Tenders were issued and evaluated and Leicester Carriage builders chosen as our preferred contractor.

1.3 Outcomes of the pilot

It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the initial pilot was to test a number of elements of the service including;

- the operation of the vehicle itself,
- onboard ICT and systems,
- the appropriateness of the sites,
- customer perception/feedback,
- staff training and development.

1.3.1 The vehicle

Throughout the pilot the vehicle has been plagued by a number of minor mechanical and technical issues which have affected our ability to promote and market the service to the public as was originally intended. Some examples are listed below

- Returned to contractor to fit a new tachograph
- Returned to contractor to correct items on the snagging list
- Returned to contractor for corrections to graphics and paintwork

- Refit air conditioning casing
- Vehicle and on board electrical systems not charging overnight

Fleet services have indicated that in their experience the problems encountered are nothing unusual, however the operation of the FSE means that the impact is greater as we work to a strict time table and will be measured on the reliability of the service. Having to take the vehicle off the road for minor items delayed the go live date and caused interruptions to the implementation and marketing plans
Feedback from the driver on the operation of the vehicle itself, its manoeuvrability, fuel consumption etc is good

1.3.2 ICT

In addition to the above a major problem has been remote wireless access to the IT network, this has been inconsistent and has created problems for the staff in trying to connect to the systems required to process customer enquiries or obtain additional information.

Following advice from Coventry City Council, we have subsequently installed additional software (IMO) which allows us to switch to different network providers in different locations depending on which one has the stronger signal. While work is ongoing with the provider the initial results are extremely positive and it is hoped that this will eradicate most of the problems.

1.3.3 Sites

Sites chosen were selected against criteria which took into account the;

- demographics of the borough
- vehicle access
- proximity to the town centre
- visibility
- public safety
- network connectivity
- nearby facilities

It is felt that the criteria and the information used was the best available at the time and that the chosen sites provided a good spread across the borough and required little in the way of negotiations with any of the site owners.

However it was always the intention to review all sites after the initial pilot when we had a better feel for public perception and once service providers, members and users had gained a better understanding of the vehicle and its capabilities.

In total we have received over 1000 visitors to the bus during the pilot with the most frequent customer enquiries relating to street pride and WHG.

The former highlights the benefit of providing an easy local access point to report matters relating to cleaner, greener streets which we know to be an area of priority to residents across the borough. The fact that we still receive enquiries relating to WHG indicates that some members of the public still lack an understanding of where certain responsibilities lie and the FSE could help to join up our respective services.

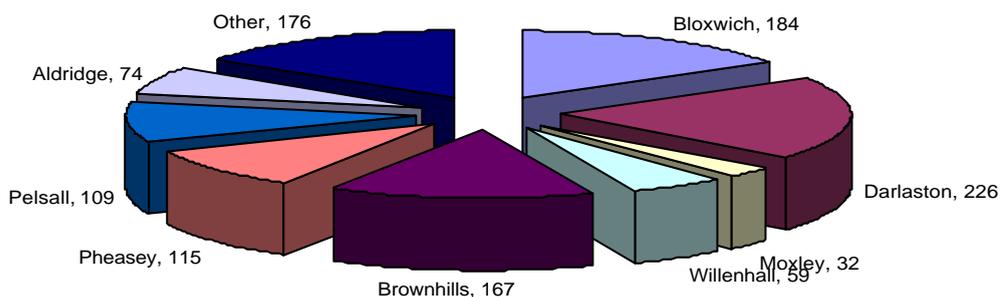
Figures indicate Darlaston, Bloxwich and Brownhills to be the most popular sites with Moxley, Willenhall and Aldridge having the poorest take up.

It became evident early in the pilot that the latter locations would struggle to attract visitors given their relative lack of footfall due to being slightly away from the main

shopping area. As a result a decision was taken to terminate the service at Moxley and Willenhall at the end of September to enable us to utilise the time to visit alternate sites. While acknowledging that increased promotion of the Express will help, it is interesting to note that the three most popular sites are all located on or very close to supermarkets or shopping centres. It is clear that a number of our visits are from people who have noticed the vehicle as a result of carrying out their normal day to day business and taken the opportunity to avail themselves of the service. It is important that future locations recognise not only the areas of customer need but that of customer convenience and the ability for the public to fit visits in with their normal day to day routine.

It is acknowledged that visitor figures are relatively low; however we must take account of the very limited marketing and publicity that has taken place as a result of the technical issues referred to earlier. It would have been extremely counter productive to have undergone any serious marketing whilst a number of technical problems were still to be addressed and impacting on the quality of service provided.

First Stop Express -total of customer numbers at sites to date (March-Oct)



1.3.4 Customer perception/feedback

Customer feedback has been excellent and a survey carried out in April/May 100% of users stated they were satisfied with the facilities offered on the FSE with 79% very satisfied with how the advisor dealt with their enquiry. Of non users 70% had not heard of the FSE before the interview but 66% thought it would help them access council services

In addition we also showcased the bus at a customer experience stakeholder forum in April which again resulted in excellent feedback, 96% of respondents thinking the FSE good or very good, although 61% stated they had not heard of it prior to the forum.

Both the above highlight the feeling that an increase in marketing and public awareness is fundamental to the success of the FSE. A number of respondents felt that press releases alone would not suffice and visible showcasing and face to face promotion would be more effective and that the resultant word of mouth could prove more beneficial

1.3.5 Staff Development/Training

The express operates with a senior customer service advisor and a driver who is also trained to provide customer service support. This ensures we can deal with multiple enquiries and avoids any lone working issues.

The driver was recruited from the council's redeployment pool having previously worked as a driver in Street Pride. He was provided with 6 months on the job training within the First Stop Shop prior to the launch giving him a broad understanding and knowledge of the services available and developing his basic ICT skills.

A decision was made at the start of the project to utilise experienced customer service advisors from the First Stop Shop pool on a rotational basis, which has helped to minimise training requirements and we currently have five advisors trained to an appropriate level to operate on the vehicle. This has worked successfully during the pilot but it should be noted that staffing levels in the customer service team are low. Despite previous investment bids the service has seen a reduction in resources over the last 2 years while the provision of services and number of access points to the public has increased.

Feedback from the staff has been positive with all those operating on the vehicle stating that the express provides a more informal and relaxed environment allowing better customer engagement, with clear indications that the service helps provide for a more local identity.

1.3.6 Current service provision

The initial core services currently provided by the FSE include the following

- Reporting of fly tipping and anti social behaviour
- Requesting bulky collections
- Reporting pothole and highway defects
- Reporting of missed refuse collection, garden (green waste) and dry recyclables
- Applying for a disabled parking badge
- Checking and verification of application forms for concessionary bus passes collection service and advice on removal of household rubbish
- Viewing planning applications on line
- Requesting planning application forms or council job vacancy
- Making cheque payments for council services
- Requesting disinfestations service

At its meeting on 14th July 2009 scrutiny panel resolved that members of the public should be able to report anti social behaviour via the FSE, the list above confirms that this facility is already available to the public and work with the ASB team is already under way to further promote and improve this service

The project team are making continued efforts to target and encourage service areas to utilise the bus to engage with the public. Some services have been reluctant to commit resources, however we are now seeing a gradual increase in interest with a number now coming forward to trial advice surgeries or promote schemes. It seems certain that the more services we can provide the more visitors the FSE will receive.

The Emergency Planning Unit has, as part of the Borough Swine Flu Outbreak response plan, identified the FSE as a mobile vaccination point. The PCT would use the vehicle to support the vulnerable in the community by administering the vaccine and as an information point. This partnership arrangement with the PCT is the council's normal

response in any emergency. The role of the council is to protect the vulnerable, support the emergency / health services and to maintain business continuity. The FSE is also a valuable asset in providing resilience in response to the many and varied emergencies we have in the borough.

1.4 Next Steps

As stated earlier visitor numbers are relatively low which can be attributed to poor marketing and in the case of Willenhall, Moxley and Aldridge unsuitable locations. There is a clear need to raise awareness of the vehicle with an improved promotional campaign. Most of those who have used the vehicle have effectively been passing trade who have become aware of it as a result of seeing it on site rather than any press release or advertising. Using our in house marketing and communications team and our customer service advisors we aim to raise the profile of the service and inform the public more effectively of what is available to them.

The period from October to the end of December is being utilised to increase public awareness of the FSE by hosting a number of events supporting specific council and partner initiatives at various locations. Apart from existing sites we are also testing others from our original short list e.g. Sainsburys Reedswood, Morrisons Bescot, Aldi Moxley and will continue to look for other potential locations especially within district centres.

As well as dealing with day to day enquiries the FSE is designed to provide the council with an easily accessible tool to help consult with residents, inform them of the services we provide and obtain feedback to help shape future service delivery. The aforementioned events are providing us the opportunity to do that while allowing us to showcase to the public the wider purpose of the vehicle in helping to deal with their day to day enquiries. The vehicle can prove a vital tool in improving community engagement which is an important consideration given our requirements under the Duty to Involve scheme and Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

Presently data is being collected in the FSS to analyse where visitors are travelling from and the nature of their enquiries, this will help identify the services to be provided and the areas we may need to target. This will be incorporated with information held by our marketing and performance teams to help map areas of potential take up.

It is proposed to launch a revised timetable for 2010 building on the knowledge gained from the pilot, focusing attention on sites with existing high footfall and areas which existing intelligence suggests will provide the greatest take up. However it is also important that we maximise the use of the vehicle and continue to utilise it as and when appropriate for promotional events, new initiatives and to provide support in emergency situations. With that in mind it is recognised that the proposed timetable needs to remain flexible and to take account of changing circumstances and needs.

A further consideration will be the proposals to introduce a neighbourhood management scheme. The FSE will be well placed to support this initiative as the timetable could be structured to support the designated areas providing residents in those localities with an appropriate access point for reporting and receiving information