

POLICY & RESOURCES CABINET BOARD

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF CORPORATE STRATEGY AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

16TH OCTOBER 2014

SECTION A – MATTER FOR DECISION

WARDS AFFECTED: Godre'rgraig, Pontardawe, Alltwen, Trebanos, Rhos, Cwmllynfell, Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, Lower Brynamman, Ystalyfera.

PONTARDAWE ONE STOP SHOP / ADVICE HUB

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To report an assessment of changes introduced at Pontardawe One Stop Shop agreed as part of the FFP in 2013/14 together with the evaluation of European Social Fund (ESF) funded services developed at the same location to benefit families on low incomes.

BACKGROUND:

On 14th November 2013, the Policy & Resources Cabinet Board considered a report recommending alternative service delivery arrangements at the Pontardawe One Stop Shop in order to achieve an identified savings target of £40,000 against the customer facing services at Pontardawe One Stop Shop.

The options available to secure the £40,000 savings identified included:

- Closing the service at the One Stop Shop – this was not preferred as remodelling the service is a viable option and would not deliver savings additional to remodelling the service;
- Remodelling the services – this was the preferred option.

The recommendations on alternative service delivery arrangements included:

- All of the services currently provided by Customer Services to be delivered by the Library staff within existing Library budgets (exception to this – Council Tax enquiries to be dealt with by Housing Benefit officers at the location and complex Blue Badges enquiries to continue to be dealt with by Customer Services officers but by appointment).
- Alternative means of payment be offered to customers and the cashiers facility is then closed. Support is provided to all existing customers to help them select an alternative that best suits their circumstances
- The Housing Benefits service provided operates from the location on two days per week, rather than the existing three and on the same days as NPT Homes operates.

This review of the services provided at the Pontardawe One Stop Shop was conducted at the same time as work being undertaken with wider partners to examine how joint working arrangements could mitigate the impact of welfare benefit changes. That work identified a potential benefit of bringing services that provide benefit advice, job search support and money / debt management into one location. The space freed up at Pontardawe by the above changes in service delivery arrangements, provided an opportunity for such an integrated service model to be piloted for a six month period and evaluated. During December 2013 an extensive consultation exercise was undertaken on the above proposed changes and 84% of responders (106 out of 122) supported the plans for an “Advice Hub”.

The Council, on behalf of the Local Service Board, has drawn down European Social Fund Grant in the sum of £590, 948 which has been used for funding new ways of working in collaboration. Part of this funding was utilised to support costs deemed eligible as part of the development of the above joint working arrangements. (A condition of the Grant is the completion of an evaluation of the impact of the use of the Grant money which has to be completed by 31st December 2014).

During early 2013, work was undertaken with services to establish the alternative service delivery arrangements outlined above and work was initiated with partner agencies to come together in a joint working arrangement. The culmination of this work was the launch of the Pontardawe Hub on the 7th April 2014.

Summary of Progress:

1. Changes to services introduced as part of the FFP

Following the vacation of Customer Services during March 2014, most of the services that were originally provided by Customer Services staff are now provided by the Library Service. Prior to the closure of the Cashier Service at the end of March 2014, alternative arrangements were put in place for council departments who banked money at the location, council customers who previously accessed encashment facilities and the processing of payments for council services. The Customer Services staff and Cashiers staff provided help and support to existing customers in selecting alternative methods of payment that best suited their circumstances. Customers still wishing to make payments by cash are able to do so at the Post Office. Since the closure of the cashiers facility, Housing Benefits and Library staff have continued to provide advice and support on alternative methods of payment. The Library Service staff have also provided help to customers to request / pay for a variety of online council services.

Members' attention is drawn to the table overleaf which summarises services delivered prior to the change and services provided after the changes were introduced.

Summary of alternative service delivery arrangements:

Original Services provided at Pontardawe	Provider before Changes	Hours of Opening	Provider after Changes	Hours of Opening
Blue Badge Applications	Customer Services	Mon 8.45am – 5pm Wed 8.45am – 5pm Fri 8.45am – 4.30pm	Library Services	Mon 9.30am - 6pm Tues 9.30am - 5pm Wed 9.30am - 6pm Thurs 9.30am - 5pm Fri 9.30am - 7pm Sat - 9.30am - 1pm
Bus Pass Applications				
Verification of CRB information				
Issue stocks of recycling and dog bags				
Bulk Collection bookings				
Reception services for building				
Council Tax Enquiries				
NPT Homes Signposting enquiries	No longer necessary due to co-location	-		
Process payments for council services	Cashiers	Mon 8.45am - 4.30pm Wed 8.45am - 4.30pm Fri 8.45am - 4.00pm	Library Services provide support to those wishing to set up alternative methods of payment / signposted to Post Office	as above Library times
Bank money for some council departments			Ceased - Alternative arrangements put in place	-
Encashment facilities for some Council customers			Ceased - Alternative arrangements put in place	-
Housing Benefits enquiries	Housing Benefits		Housing Benefits**	Tues & Thurs 9am - 1pm / 1.45pm - 5pm
Library Services	Library Services	Mon 9.30am - 6pm Tues 9.30am - 5pm Wed 9.30am - 6pm Thurs 9.30am - 5pm Fri 9.30am - 7pm Sat - 9.30am - 1pm	Library Services	No change
Range of enquiries including tenancy / rent enquiries	Neath Port Talbot Homes	Tues - 9am – 4pm Thurs - 9am - 4pm	No change **	Tues - 9am - 4pm Thurs - 9am - 4pm

** these services are located within the Hub.

The information provided in the table demonstrates the wider availability of those services that were previously delivered by Customers Services (5 ½ days instead of three).

During the period of changes, different solutions have been put in place. For example, during the first few months citizens could only access general advice regarding the application for a Blue Badge. To address this, technology is being utilised to enable a full application service to be delivered. Library staff will check the applicant’s documentation before setting up the technology to enable the applicant to be interviewed by Customer Services staff (based at Port Talbot / Neath) remotely. This service will commence on Monday 8th December 2014 when the Library re-opens following a refurbishment.

2. Development of the ESF funded Advice Hub

In addition to the above changes in service delivery, the table below summarises the agencies that were involved during the 6 month pilot of the Hub. The evaluation report attached at Appendix 1 contains an analysis of the demand which has informed the proposed involvement of agencies going forward, which also includes the Council’s Housing Benefits service and NPT Homes who are located within the Hub.

<p align="center">Agencies involved in 6 month pilot (April 14 – September 14)</p>	<p align="center">Proposed involvement for next 12 months (October 14 – September 15)</p>
Job Centre Plus	None
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	Core Agency
Calan DVS	Available on a referral / appointment basis
NPT CVS	
Dewis	
NPT Lifelong Learning Service	

The key findings of the evaluation of the Hub were:

- There is a steady footfall with an average of almost 45 clients visiting the Hub each day that it has been open (Apr-July). 71% had their issue resolved one stop
- Housing Benefits are the agency most in demand as they saw 42.5% of clients coming to the Hub, NPT Homes 36.2% and CAB 9.9%
- Clients were referred to 29 different agencies
- 90% of clients saw the agency that they intended to see when they came to the Hub
- Signposting has been a beneficial aspect of the service as clients are regularly referred to other agencies within the Hub and take advantage of this opportunity, with 30% of clients seeing another agency in addition to the one that they had intended to
- Clients are seeing the benefits of the Hub with all of those interviewed saying that they found the advice given very helpful or somewhat helpful and that they would visit the Hub again

On 4th September the Council's Welfare Rights Unit joined the Hub and provides a pre-arranged appointment service every Thursday morning and a drop in service during the afternoon (Hub opening hours). On 29th September the NPT Credit Union joined the Hub and is operating on a 5 day basis Monday – Friday (10am – 3pm).

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

The Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been reviewed and there are no amendments required to the one that was originally considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To extend the project for 12 months during which the following actions are undertaken:

Council Services:

1. A further report is brought back to Members' following the six months trial of the remote access arrangements.
2. To investigate the number of Council Tax enquiries not dealt with "one stop" and to report back to Members on the outcome of that investigation.

The Hub:

3. Those agencies that were most visited become the core agencies within the Hub working 2 days (Tuesday and Thursday) – Housing Benefits / Council Tax; NPT Homes and Citizens Advice Bureau.
4. A referral / appointment process is formalised for those agencies who had fewer visitors.
5. To undertake a review of the impact of the following services and bring a report back in 6 months time:
 - a. Credit Union
 - b. Welfare Rights Unit

REASON FOR PROPOSED DECISION:

To formalise the delivery of Council services at the Pontardawe One Stop Shop location and to formalise the basis upon which agencies engage with the Hub on an ongoing basis.

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 –Executive Summary – Pontardawe Hub

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Policy & Resources Cabinet Board – 14th November 2013 – Pontardawe One Stop Shop.

Pontardawe Hub – Low Income Families Project Full Evaluation Report

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COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

PONTARDAWE ONE STOP SHOP / ADVICE HUB

(a) **Implementation of Decision**

The decision is proposed for implementation after the three day call in period.

(b) **Sustainability Appraisal**

Community Plan Impacts:

Economic Prosperity	Positive
Education and Lifelong Learning	Positive
Better Health and Well Being	Positive
Environment and Transport	Positive
Crime and Disorder	Positive

Other Impacts:

Welsh Language	Neutral
Sustainable Development	Positive
Equalities	Positive
Social Inclusion	Positive

(c) **Consultation**

This item is not subject to external consultation.

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**Building Capacity and Capability to accelerate
service transformation from the citizens'
perspectives**

EVALUATION

Low Income Families Project

Pontardawe Hub

October 2014



Executive Summary

Pilot Project No.1 – A One Stop Shop for citizens to access, maximise and manage their finances

Aim

A one stop approach (advice hub) delivered by partners, to support people to access and maximise new and existing benefit entitlements, council tax assistance, debt and money management issues as well as helping people find work and training. Helping people to get online is key to this project and will give people the opportunity to transact in a number of areas such as paying bills online, accessing jobs and applying for courses.

Context

Due to the national context for the Low Income Families Project showing the likely increase in demand for advice services due to welfare reform and the impact that this would have locally, it was felt that clients would benefit from being able to access a range of agencies one stop.

The space freed up at Pontardawe One Stop Shop as part of the Council's wider plans for changes in service delivery at that location, provided an opportunity for such an integrated service to be piloted and evaluated. During December an extensive public consultation exercise was undertaken on the above proposed changes and 84% of responders (106 out of 122) supported the plans for the advice hub.

The Pilot Project

The Hub is open on a Tuesday and Thursday from 9-5 and commenced on the 8th April for a 6 month period. It brought together a number of agencies providing citizens with the opportunity to access welfare benefits advice, money management advice, housing advice, digital inclusion support, CV writing and job search services alongside housing benefits advice and the publicly accessible computers supported by the library. Partners involved are JobCentre Plus (JCP) Citizens Advice Bureau, Calan DVS (Welsh Women's Aid) NPT Homes, NPT Council for Voluntary Service and Dewis as well as the Council's Housing Benefits service and the Lifelong Learning Service.

Some agencies attend both days, some only attend a morning or afternoon session. The Hub operates on a drop in basis with clients seeing whichever agencies they need to.

Findings

Data from 8th April- 7th July inclusive informed the evaluation.

During those 3 months, 1,167 people attended the Hub for support. The numbers increased month by month with 337 attending in the first month,

rising to 417 in the third month. The average number of clients visiting the Hub each day that it was open was 44.9. Of those who attended, 826 (70.8%) were dealt with one stop.

The agencies most visited by clients were housing benefit and NPT Homes who saw 496 (42.5%) and 423 (36.2%) of the total clients respectively with the Citizens Advice Bureau seeing 116 (9.9%) of clients.

29 clients who visited the Hub spoke to CAB specifically for debt advice. This represents 25% of the clients that CAB have seen since the Hub opened. Of those, 21 were given advice on debt management plans. It would be hoped that this would have a positive impact on getting their debts under control and over time, reducing them.

Aside from the range of agencies available to clients in the Hub, clients have presented to the Hub with a huge range of needs which demonstrates the range of issues that the Hub is able to deal with, or, if not able to deal directly with, can refer the client onto another agency who will be able to help. The two types of need that presented most frequently were; handing in information for housing benefit (156) and amending a housing benefit claim (109). The third largest type of need presented was to pay a council tax bill (100)

Clients who attended the Hub were referred to 29 different agencies during the first three months of it being open. Council tax were the most referred to agency (98 referrals) followed by the library (75 referrals) and housing benefit (47 referrals).

Aside from being referred on to another agency (255 clients) which includes those referred to another agency within the Hub, the action most likely to be undertaken within the Hub was housing benefit documents or evidence being taken (153) followed by a housing benefit amendment being completed (112).

IT Support

Due to a restructure within the organisation that were going to offer support with IT skills, they were unable to deliver on this. Dedicated IT support from a Get NPT Online volunteer started in July and is offered for 2 hours on a Thursday afternoon. It is hoped that another organisation will be able to offer support on a Tuesday. However, library staff assist clients with a range of IT support on a daily basis. This can be basic assistance such as showing them how to print a document or more complicated such as setting up an email address or developing and typing their CV. The library staff have received training on Universal Jobmatch (UJ) and have used this to assist clients looking for employment. Library staff have also been assisting clients to make payments online such as Council Tax, setting up direct payments and accessing NPT Council services online.

Client Feedback

Client feedback was sought to understand whether clients found the Hub beneficial.

The 20 clients interviewed further to their visit to the Hub were asked if their query had been resolved by the end of their visit (and therefore were dealt with one stop). 9 (45%) of those interviewed said that their query had been resolved by the end of their visit to the Hub.

12 (60%) of those interviewed said that they contacted other agencies based on the advice that they had been given. 18 (90%) of the clients interviewed said that they saw the agency or agencies that they had intended to see. 6 (30%) of those interviewed had also seen other agencies which included, NPT College, Housing Benefits, CAB, Workways and JCP therefore, certainly in some cases, clients who visit the Hub for one issue are taking advantage of the other agencies available.

Of those contacted, 14 (70%) found the advice they received very helpful and 6 (30%) found it somewhat helpful. 19 (95%) of those interviewed said that the help they received made them feel more confident in dealing with their situation. Only in 34% of cases did clients feel more confident because their situation had been resolved. In 66% of cases they felt more confident because they had received support, had become aware of their options or had acquired an understanding of what to do. Therefore, whilst resolving the situation is clearly an important factor in empowering clients, just acquiring a better knowledge and understanding can be sufficient to make them feel more confident in dealing with their situation.

All 20 interviewed said that they would be likely to return to the Hub for other issues or concerns. Those that gave reasons for this said that it is convenient and to access other agencies.

16 clients who had received finance related advice were asked if their financial situation had improved further to receiving support. This gave a range of answers that demonstrated that in some cases their financial situation had improved as a result of receiving advice. Four of those interviewed (20%) did report that their financial situation had improved with two more (a further 10%) stating that they had agreed or nearly agreed payments to lenders. It would be hoped that agreeing payments with lenders would have a positive effect on a client's financial situation. Six clients (30%) were still awaiting the outcome of a benefit application or other changes.

Agency Feedback

The agencies who attend the Hub were also interviewed to gather their feedback on it. All of those interviewed felt that clients have benefited from the Hub. The main reasons cited for this were;

- (i) Clients are able to access services that they previously would have had to travel a distance to.

- (ii) Agencies are able to quickly refer clients to each other, some of the clients whom they may not have had referred to them at all otherwise. This has meant that clients receive prompt and impartial information. Some of the agencies interviewed raised that referring between themselves was an unexpected outcome and benefit from the Hub.
- (iii) All agencies that were interviewed felt that the Hub is able to meet the needs of the clients who are attending as it is offering a service that wasn't available previously.

One potential issue that agencies commented on that may affect clients' ability to access a range of support in one place was that it could be difficult for people who work to attend the Hub and the times or days may not suit everyone. No other specific barriers to clients accessing the service were raised and it was felt by all agencies that resources are being used in the most suitable way for the Hub and that opening 2 days per week was sufficient for the footfall coming in, enabling them to meet the demand that is presenting. It was acknowledged that demand fluctuates though.

One of the agencies interviewed also commented that since being part of the Hub they have noticed that people seem to be keeping to their pre-arranged appointments and they have very few, 'no shows.' Whilst this comment wasn't explored further, it is hoped that this is reflective of the fact that clients found the advice given helpful and that all of those interviewed would return to the Hub for other advice and that they like the Hub environment and feel comfortable in attending it to seek advice or support.

Apart from the benefits reported by clients themselves, the feedback from the agencies who attend the Hub has also provided a valuable insight into it. All of the agencies interviewed said that the Hub was what they expected it to be and there wasn't anything that hasn't been done that they thought would be although there were a couple of comments that due to the change in the nature of the use of the building (customer service staff used to be present there) people do still drop in asking about general enquiries and expecting staff there to be able to help them. In other cases people need to be redirected to the library in the same building for assistance with certain enquiries such as Blue Badges. Agencies' perceived that there was a lack of knowledge in the community about the Hub, with people still referring to it as the, 'One Stop Shop.' Greater promotion of the Hub and the services on offer there was suggested by one agency and another commented that it felt that other agencies (external to the Hub) should be signposting people to the Hub.

A large number of promotional activities took place when the Hub was launched. Staff from agencies that are present at the Hub were interviewed a relatively short time after the Hub was launched, therefore, at that point, knowledge of it within the local community may have still been limited. It is hoped that if staff were interviewed again at a later date, they may feel that this situation has improved as a lot of promotion has taken place and hopefully it has had a positive impact.

A few comments were made on things that could be done differently which included a receptionist to direct clients to the relevant agency and that footfall needed to be increased for some agencies. One agency in particular commented that their footfall is too low, although since JCP started attending, they hope that this will improve. It was also suggested that if JCP clients could sign on there to receive their benefits, this might help to increase footfall for some of the other agencies too. It was felt that getting clients to come in can be a struggle for some of the agencies present. On the other hand, one agency has had to turn clients away on occasion and operates an appointment system throughout the day (clients are given an appointment time when they come in). They said it would be beneficial for them to have an additional advisor present but resources did not allow it and as demand fluctuates, there could be some weeks when that person wasn't busy.

The only addition to the Hub that any of the agencies would like to see would be a phone that they could use to make external calls. One agency had concerns that the set up didn't allow for enough confidentiality as people were sharing personal information in an open environment and that this could be a barrier to people accessing their service although private interview rooms are available at the Hub.

Conclusion

- There is a steady footfall with an average of almost 45 clients visiting the Hub each day that it has been open (Apr-July). 71% had their issue resolved one stop
- Housing Benefit are the agency most in demand as they saw 42.5% of clients coming to the Hub, NPT Homes 36.2% and CAB 9.9%
- Clients were referred to 29 different agencies
- 90% of clients saw the agency that they intended to see when they came to the Hub
- Signposting has been a beneficial aspect of the service as clients are regularly referred to other agencies within the Hub and take advantage of this opportunity, with 30% of clients seeing another agency in addition to the one that they had intended to
- Clients are seeing the benefits of the Hub with all of those interviewed saying that they found the advice given very helpful or somewhat helpful and that they would visit the Hub again