

REPORT TO: PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date of Meetings: 1st November 2018

Report of: Cllr Rachel Lyons
Chair of the Accessibility and Inclusion Task and Finish Group

Title: Accessibility and Inclusion Task and Finish Group Report

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1. What is the report about?

To report the findings and recommendations of this Task and Finish Group to the People Scrutiny Committee.

2. Recommendations:

The People Scrutiny Committee support further investigations as to whether:-

- (a) An "Access to Support" page can be incorporated into a prominent place on the Council's website;
- (b) Council Services and accessibility support can be advertised on the internal screens in the Customer Service Centre;
- (c) Council Services and accessibility support can be advertised on screens at local doctors' surgeries and whether there is an associated cost;
- (d) An A-Z page of Council services with general departmental contact details can be provided on the website and in paper form in various formats;
- (e) Icons can be added to menu options on the website to provide better prompts and signposting to Council services;
- (f) Direct links for key services can be introduced under the area headings which appear on the initial front page of the website;
- (g) The website can be adapted to provide options to change the magnification, background colour and font size and colour;
- (h) The website in general is compatible with the screen reading software often used by partially sighted customers.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

- To ensure that the Council continues to meet its legislative and policy requirements;
- To fulfil the aspiration of becoming a City where everyone can access Council services, facilities and information easily;
- To learn from the feedback of service users and officers;
- To provide a more interactive website which will enable better access for on line users and free up officer time;
- To provide information in an easier to read and accessible format;
- To highlight the types of support available to individuals to assist them in accessing Council services and information;
- To continually develop the Council's customer offer in terms of access to information and services.

4. What are the resource implications including non-financial resources:

Officer time.

5. Section 151 Officer Comments:

There are no financial implications contained in this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

The Equality Act 2010 applies and this report demonstrates the Council's ongoing compliance with its legislative requirements.

7. Monitoring officer Comments

This report raises no issues of concern to the Monitoring Officer

8. Report Details:

The Context

This topic was raised as a high priority topic for Task and Finish Group investigation at the Interim Scrutiny Programme Meeting in November 2017. Inclusivity and accessibility remain high on the agenda both at national and local level and Exeter City Council is committed to providing a well run Council with effective, efficient, person centred services.

Access is not just about physical access but also about the way in which we choose to communicate as a Council. It is essential to consider what information the Council provides, how it provides it and what assistance is available to help all individuals fully access information and services.

The Equality Act 2010 provides the legislative framework with a statutory requirement for reasonable adjustments to be made to ensure that the provision of information is provided in an accessible format.

The Council's Equality Policy was recently revised and subsequently approved by the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee on the 28th June 2018. The adoption of the revised Policy further cements the Council's commitment to making information about services more widely available and easily accessible to everyone. The Policy also strengthens links to the Council's commitment to the Devon Joint Declaration for Equality.

The Group

Membership of the Group consisted of:-

- Cllr Wardle

- Cllr Lyons
 - Cllr Bialyk
 - Cllr Foggin
 - Cllr Natalie Vizard
 - Cllr Robson
 - Cllr Wright
 - Cllr Mitchell
 - Cllr Hannan
 - Cllr Morse
 - Cllr Musgrave
- Jo Yelland, Director
 - Melinda Pogue-Jackson, Policy Officer

Objectives:-

The Group agreed that the priority would be communication with particular regard to:-

- reviewing accessibility of the Council's website in relation to those with wide ranging disabilities;
- investigating whether the Council obtains feedback with regards to accessibility of services and whether that feedback is obtained in a uniform way across the Council;
- understanding what the departmental customer offer is in terms of accessibility for those with a wide range of disabilities.

The Background

Given the broad range of the topic and work already underway in relation to accessibility and safeguarding it was essential to focus the work of the Group. As a result of this, the Group decided that it would be of benefit to focus on specific services, to understand the current position with regard to accessibility, what is working well and what challenges they face. The second part of the Group's work would focus on gaining and considering feedback from service users who have wide ranging disabilities.

Service areas selected were:-

- Housing Benefit
- Housing Advice
- Customer Access
- Environmental Health.

Service Leads from each were invited to join the Group to provide an overview of their particular service and answer specific questions so that there was a consistent structure from which to draw comparisons. It was clear that there is a lot of ongoing work in terms of services improving accessibility and that staff are going to great lengths to assist customers where they can.

Housing Benefits

The System Lead Finance, Customer Access reminded the Group that Housing Benefits is means tested and very complex with a lot of “jargon” which officers do try to explain to people and attempt to make the letters as easy to understand as possible. The way in which decisions are communicated and the form which they have to take is governed by statutory requirement and there are time limits for obtaining information both of which cause a challenge - information and decisions have to be provided in written format and contain reasons for the decision. The Council’s Benefits Department uses a computer software system known as Capita and officers can customise letters to a degree but the system is restricted in terms of formatting and it is not possible to manually change the way in which the calculations are presented within each letter. With that said, on particularly complex cases, officers do try to follow the letter with a phone call to make sure that the customer understands the information.

With current staff capacity and limited resources, increasing reliance will have to be placed on automated systems and the potential for major difficulty and barriers comes in the form of Universal Credit which is digital by default, whereas the current benefit system is not solely digital and much more focussed on face to face communication to help customers.

Housing Advice

The Interim System Lead, Housing Needs explained that officers are skilled and experienced in identifying difficulties and that a lot of “hidden” assessment takes place and this is part of the day to day customer service approach.

The introduction of the Housing Reduction Act has caused difficulty. The Housing Advice service has had to increase letter templates from 5 to 19 and the letters are now very technical, quoting legislation which is not very helpful in terms of customers’ understanding.

Community connectors are essential and there is some project work being undertaken over the next 6 months with community connectors and Housing First clients – this will support accessibility and the results of the Housing Options Survey will be available shortly.

Customer Access

The System Lead, Finance specified that Customer Access encompasses a wide range of services such as the Customer Support Centre, the Call Centre, Council Tax Support and Housing Benefits. It is a challenging area because on one hand, help is provided (for example, housing benefit) and on the other hand, the service is responsible for collecting taxes. Often Customer Access staff are in contact with the most vulnerable individuals on a daily basis and there seems to be an increase in those customers presenting with mental health issues and learning difficulties. It is essential that officers have very good listening and communication skills which enable them to uncover issues and identify those vulnerable individuals at an early stage to ensure that they are assisted in the best way for their needs.

A hearing loop is available in the Customer Service Centre and a mobile loop is available to be taken into interview rooms. Currently two Customer Service Officers are undertaking a sign language course and one member of staff is conversant already. An external specialist interpretation service is available and can assist with more complex cases and those requiring a detailed and accurate explanation.

The Lagan system can be accessed by different Council services and is used to record details of customers with particular issues or difficulties (only with the customers' permission).

Environmental Health

The Principal Environmental Health Officer informed the Group that the same sort of theme applied (as with the other services) in respect of legislative requirements as to what information has to be set out and how.

This service is very much based around the needs of the person with a lot of the people seen by Housing Advice also coming into contact with the Environmental Health Department. Most of the time it is the Environmental Health officers who initiate contact with individuals as a result of reported incidents. Most of the communication is carried out face to face through visits since some people do not have 'phones or the internet, so a tailored approach is taken as to the best form of communication to suit each person's requirements.

Environmental Health officers are spending much more time not only dealing with the issue to hand, but helping to signpost individuals to various agencies so that they can obtain the right assistance for other issues they may have. There is a great emphasis on building relationships with people.

Interpretation services are available, however officers find that individuals will usually communicate with the help of a friend, relative or support worker.

Current Website Accessibility

The Digital Services Officer confirmed that Strata provide all technical accessibility adaptations leaving three main areas as the responsibility of the Digital Services Officer which are:-

- Readability
- Content Design
- Document Accessibility

In terms of readability the Council subscribes to a tool called SiteImprove to provide insights into web usage, trends and error checking, together with a facility to score pages on their readability by giving each page a "reading age". Using these measures as a guide, 65% of the website requires a reading age of less than 16 years with the remaining percentage relating to such areas as Planning and Building Control which need to provide technical content or legal background.

Content design concentrates upon presenting sometimes quite complicated information in an easily readable and well set out fashion using plain English. For example, sensible use of headings and sub headings, short sentences and paragraphs, long pages split into multi-page guides and plenty of white space with clearly defined links and minimum use of tables.

Using documents on the website is avoided wherever possible although if essential the information can be converted onto an actual page. Forms, policies, legal documents and leaflets cannot be changed and currently there are over 700 Adobe pdf files and 130 Word documents on the website. All new pdf documents are checked to see if they have been “tagged” as this means that they are accessible and if not, this means that the document could be seen as a blank document to a visually impaired reader using screen reader technology.

Service Users' Response

The second part of the Group's work was to concentrate upon engaging with service users to gain their views. A questionnaire survey was conducted with focussed questions as to how individuals choose to access Council services and information; how easy they thought this was together with any suggestions they might have for improvement. Assistance was provided by Living Options, the Learning Disability Partnership and a member of Exeter City Council's staff. The aim was to reach people with a wide range of disabilities, sending questionnaires not only via e-mail but also by post using specific formats. Generally the feedback suggests that the Council's overall accessibility rating is good in terms of communication and assistance. What is noticeable is the amount of people who choose to contact the Council by phone, either themselves or with the help of family or support workers (rather than on line).

Positive comments were received and some are set out below:-

“I have contacted the Council by ‘phone and I found the staff to be very helpful and dealt with my enquiry swiftly and professionally. I believe that by ‘phoning the Council staff I could quickly find out what support is available to me”.

“As long as I can reach Council Services by ‘phone direct I am satisfied”.

“I have been in there (CSC) a couple of times and was very satisfied with the staff and they did give me the information I wanted”.

“The lady on the ‘phone was friendly and helpful”.

“I prefer to talk face to face with people. I have hearing loss so it's not always easy on the ‘phone and I am not on the internet. The staff have always been very helpful whenever I've met with them”.

In relation to the website:-

“I can access any time, can search, magnify and print as required, I can e-mail or complete contact sheets and am able to review correspondence when I am able and in my chosen format”.

“Understanding is not an issue although the contrast on the “next page” and “previous page”, “start” and “submit” buttons could be increased and greater distinctions could be achieved around the sections where the customer has to input information”.

“Access to information on Housing Benefit, Housing Advice and Environmental Health was not easy to find”.

In conclusion

Taking into account the research, investigation and service users’ feedback received, the Group settled upon the recommendations contained within this report which demonstrate ways in which the current customer offer and profile of accessibility may be improved whilst complementing ongoing existing work.

There are two prominent messages resulting from the work of this Group. Firstly, that it is not easy or clear to find out what support there is for access to Council services generally and that the Council needs to better advertise its offer in respect of the support available. Secondly, in a time of an ever increasing digital offer to customers, other forms of communication should not be overlooked or viewed as less important.

Supporting those with hidden disabilities will always be an ever evolving process and there is great reliance on Council staff to identify individuals who may require specific assistance to best suit their needs. Although a pro-active approach is taken towards improving accessibility, the very nature of the subject can also be reactive in that the Council also relies upon service users to make it aware of areas which could be improved upon or altered.

There must be realistic expectations as to what can be achieved because of restrictions outside the Council’s control such as legislative requirements, limited resources and the increasing use of automated systems. However, the recommendations contained within this report suggest some relatively simple, but potentially very effective reasonable adjustments that the Council could make to improve accessibility to Council information and Services for all.

9 What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, Economy safety and the environment?

Any improvements to accessing Council services will have a positive impact upon equality, diversity and social inclusion for all.

Cllr Rachel Lyons: Chair of the Accessibility and Inclusion Task and Finish Group

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:

None

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