



Report to Cabinet

Subject Access Strategy

Date

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1. Purpose of the Report

To present an Access Strategy for adoption by Cabinet.

2. Background

Under the remit of the Resources and Management Scrutiny Committee, the Access Strategy Working Group has been looking at the development of a Customer Access Strategy in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder. This Working Group came from the One Stop Shop Working Group which oversaw the introduction of the One Stop Shop, and the development of an Access Strategy followed up this work.

The Working Group carried out a considered evaluation of all Access Channels themselves and the relative effectiveness of these for customers and for the services they require. The analysis of this work is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

A consultant was commissioned to carry out a survey in Newstead, as this was considered to be an area of the Borough which was geographically isolated and relative deprived. This would provide information on how people wish to contact the Council and their experiences. The results of this survey are attached as Appendix 2 to this report.

The Working Group then considered all this information and developed the Strategy as attached as Appendix 3.

The strategic vision and aims of the strategy are contained in sections 6 and 7, and the priorities for delivering these are described in section 8. The strategy also contains a series of standards for electronic communication which is appendix A to the report.

Resources and Management Scrutiny Committee considered the strategy at their meeting on 18th July 2005, and agreed to refer it to the Portfolio Holder for adoption through Cabinet.

3. Proposal

The Access Strategy as attached as Appendix 3 is agreed.

4. Resource Implications

There are no specific resource implications arising from this strategy.

5. Equality Implications

The strategy itself is designed to ensure equality of access to all of the Council's services. It provides for a number of different channels of access to enable customers with differing needs to access services.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Access Strategy is agreed.

Access Strategy - Evaluation of Channels

Access Channels	Services												Number of X's
	Benefits	Housing	Council Tax	Planning	Job Application	Homeless	Crime & Disorder Reporting	Leisure	Bus Pass	Payments	Multiple Services	Environment	
One Stop Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		11
Telephones	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	10
Direct contact with Elected Members		✓		✓		✓	✓						4
Letters				✓	✓				✓	✓			4
Front Line Staff		✓					✓	✓				✓	4
Internet			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	8
Cemetery Lodge	✓	✓	✓						✓		✓		5
Travelling advice shops/e-officers	✓					✓					✓		3
Surgeries	✓										✓		2
Intermediaries	✓	✓		✓		✓							4
Number of X's	6	6	4	6	4	4	5	4	3	4	6	3	

Introduction

This survey was carried out of residents of Newstead village.

The intention was to visit all 450 households in the village to achieve a sample of 100 residents. In the event the response rate was slightly better than 1 in 4.5, so a few households were not visited. Those not visited were spread across the main house types in the village - older terraced houses, inter war former NCB properties and more recently built properties, mostly owner occupied.

Newstead is a former mining village at the northern tip of Gedling Borough. It is closer to Sutton in Ashfield and Hucknall, both of which are in the Ashfield District Council area, than to the Gedling urban area. These towns are also easier to access by public transport and children living at Newstead tend to attend Secondary Schools in Ashfield.

For the first decade after the Local Government re-organisation of 1974, Newstead was part of the Ashfield District Council area.

Close identification with the Ashfield towns and the remoteness of the village from the main settlements of Gedling have led to concerns about whether residents were receiving a level of service from Gedling Borough Council that is satisfactory and comparable to other parts of the Borough.

As a former mining village, Newstead has benefited from regeneration funding. Decisions on priorities have generally been taken locally. The village has a Miners Welfare located in modern premises, which also serves as the headquarters of the Nottinghamshire Community Council. A youth centre has recently been refurbished and a children's centre completed with support from Surestart. A New Opportunities Fund financed Healthy Living Centre occupies former shop premises opposite the Miners Welfare building.

Newstead also has an active Parish Council.

There is also a railway station on the Robin Hood Line between Nottingham and Mansfield. The village has one shop in addition to a hot food take away. There is a Primary School within the village.

Many of the former NCB houses were taken over by the East Midlands Housing Association (EMH), although some properties in the village are owned by Gedling Borough Council.

EMH also owns a Warden Aided complex, consisting of 20 flats.

The Sample

43 respondents were male, 57 female. All described themselves as White. 4 lived in Warden Aided accommodation.

Just over one third were aged 60 or over.

1. Age	Frequency
Under 25	7
25 - 44	36
45 - 59	23
60 - 74	20
75+	14

A majority of respondents had lived in their current homes for over 10 years.

2. Residence	Frequency
Under a year	8
1 - 2 years	11
2 - 5 years	14
5 - 10 years	15
Over 10 years	52

One third of respondents had difficulties with hearing, vision, mobility, reading or spoke English as a foreign language. The two for whom English was not their first language had lived in Britain for many years and did not regard this as a problem or difficulty.

3. Disabilities	Frequency
Not answered (i.e. none)	67
Hearing	14
Visual	5
Mobility	21
English is not my first language	2
Dyslexia or difficulty reading	2

82 households had regular use of a motor vehicle. 71 respondents had access to the vehicle and were licensed and able to drive it.

4. Vehicle	Household member Has regular use Of a motor vehicle	Respondents has Access to a vehicle and is licensed and able to drive
Yes	82	71
No	18	29

52 respondents were from households in which at least one member had easy access to the internet of whom 45 had easy access themselves as well as the skills to use it.

5. Internet	Household member has easy access to the internet	Respondent has easy access to the internet and the skills to use it
Yes	52	45
No	48	55

Accessing Services

Respondents were shown a card and asked whether they had contacted any organisation or Councillor during the previous 12 months about any of a range of services and issues.

6. Have you contacted any organisation, public body or Councillor about any of these issues since this time last year? Open question	Frequency
Not answered (i.e. no contact)	39
Housing Repairs	18
Council Tax	14
Planning	9
Pest Control	9
Housing Benefit	7
Crime and Disorder	7
Bus Pass	7
Missed bin	5
Bulky waste collection	5
Social Services	3
Free School meals	3
Leisure	2
Disabled Badge	2
Schools information	2
Homeless advice	1
Car Park fine	0
Child Minders	0
Others (please say)	21

Table's 7a to 7o show which body was contacted and by what method. Those who had contacted Gedling Borough Council were asked whether they were satisfied with the outcome.

9 of 17 Housing Association tenants and 5 of 7 Council tenants had approached the Council (9), East Midlands Housing (8) or the Parish Council about housing repairs.

7a. Housing repairs (18) Bodies contacted and contact method		
GBC	9	(Phone 8, Visit 1)
EMH	8	(Phone 4, Warden 2, Visit / letter, via relative 1 each)
Parish Council	1	(Phone / letter)
8 respondents who contacted GBC were satisfied with the outcome		

8 of the 14 respondents who contacted the Council about Council Tax had lived in their homes for less than 2 years.

7b. Council Tax (14) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	14	(Phone 9, Visit 3, Internet / phone, Letter 1 each)
12 respondents were satisfied with the outcome. 1 other accepted that the outcome was fair.		

9 respondents had made an enquiry about Pest Control, which was mentioned by some others as an issue in the village.

7c. Pest Control (9) Bodies contacted and contact method		
GBC	8	(Phone 7, Stopped Council Officer in street 1)
Parish Council	1	(Phone / letter)
5 of the respondents who contacted Gedling Borough Council were satisfied with the outcome. 1 of those who wasn't was the respondent who stopped a Council Officer in the street.		

All 9 respondents who had enquired about planning issues were owner-occupiers. They were twice as likely to be male than female.

7d. Planning (9) Bodies contacted and contact method		
GBC	7	(Phone 4, Letter 2, Phone / letter 1)
Councillor	1	(letter)
Parish Council	1	(visit)
All 7 respondents who contacted Gedling Borough Council were satisfied with the outcome		

7 respondents contacted Gedling Borough Council about Bus Passes including 2 from households with school age children.

7e. Bus Pass (7) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	7	(Visit 3, Phone, Posted form 2 each)
All 7 respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

Paddy Tipping MP conducts street canvasses in which constituents are invited to display a sign if they have an issue to raise. This was counted as an enquiry for the purpose of this survey.

7f. Crime and disorder (7) Bodies contacted and contact method		
Police	3	(Phone, Phone / PC, Letter 1 each)
GBC	1	(Phone)
GBC / MP	1	(Phone / e-mail)
MP	1	(MP canvass)
Warden	1	(Visit)

6 females and 1 male respondent contacted the Council about Housing Benefits, including 5 of the 28 who lived in rented property. 4 had at least one of the disabilities listed.

7g. Housing Benefit (7) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	7	(Phone, Phone / visit 2 each, Visit, Phone / letter, via relative 1 each)
6 respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

The 5 respondents who contacted the Council about bulky waste collection were all owner-occupiers.

7h. Bulky Waste (5) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	5	(Phone 5)
All 5 respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

7i. Missed bin (5) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	5	(Phone 5)
4 respondents who contacted Gedling Borough Council were satisfied with the outcome		

7j. Free school meals (3) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	3	(Phone 3)
All 3 respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

7k. Social Services (3) Body contacted and contact method		
Social Services	3	(Phone 2, Phone / meeting 1)

7l. Disabled badge (2) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	2	(Phone 2)
Both respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

7m. Leisure (2) Bodies contacted and contact method		
Kimberley LC	1	(Phone)
GBC	1	(Phone / letter)
The respondent who contacted Gedling Borough Council was satisfied with the outcome		

7n. Schools information (2) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	2	(Phone 2)
Both respondents were satisfied with the outcome		

7o. Homeless advice (1) Body contacted and contact method		
GBC	1	(Phone)
The respondent was not satisfied with the outcome		

21 respondents contacted the Council or other body about other issues, one of whom made 3 enquiries.

8. Other contacts				
Issue	Number Contacted		Method	Satisfied (GBC only)
Street light	4	GBC 4	Phone 3 Phone / e-mail 1	2 of 4
Litter	3	GBC 2 GBC / Councillor 1	Phone 3	2 of 3
Lettings	2	GBC 1 ADC 1	Phone 2	0 of 1
Street cleaning	2	GBC 2	Phone 1 Phone / letter / e-mail 1	0 of 2
Drains	2	GBC 1 Parish Councillor 1	Phone 1 Visit / Phone 1	1 of 1
Care Allowance	1	CAB / Gov Dept	Visit 1	
Highways	1	MP 1	Street canvass 1	
Stolen bin	1	GBC 1	Phone 1	1 of 1
Trading Standards	1	MP / CAB 1	Street canvass / visit 1	
Sewers	1	GBC 1	Phone 1	0 of 1
Wheelie bin replacement	1	GBC 1	Phone 1	0 of 1
Empty house	1	GBC 1	Phone 1	1 of 1
Damaged bin	1	GBC 1	Friend / phone 1	0 of 1
Gardening advice	1	GBC 1	Phone 1	1 of 1
Recycling	1	GBC 1	E-mail 1	1 of 1

Respondents were asked: Thinking about the services that you have not used during the last year, who would you contact if you needed them? In many cases respondents were unable to answer about services which they believed were not relevant to them - for example about childcare or schools among older respondents or services such as Housing Benefit or Homeless advice among those who felt that they would not need them. This does not necessarily mean that they would not be able to find out who to approach if they needed a service.

Some owner occupiers did not reply to the question about housing repairs, others saying that they would go to a private company. Among Council tenants 4 of 7, (3 of them women,) said that they didn't know who to contact. Among 17 Housing Association tenants, 9 did not know including 6 women and 3 of the 4 in Warden Aided accommodation.

Those who had saved the Councils list of phone numbers were most likely to reply to all sections.

9a. Thinking about the services that you have not used during the last year, who would you contact if you needed them? Card shown

Planning (of 81)

GBC 49; Council list 10; EMH, NMW 5 each; Relative, Phone Book 2 each; GBC website, Councillor, Warden, Directory enquiries 1 each

Not answered / don't know 14

Housing Benefit (of 93)

GBC 34; Council list 10; NMW 5; DHSS 4, Relative 3; Phone Book 2, EMH, Job Centre, Social Services, NMW Housing Benefit surgery, DHSS / GBC, Directory enquiries, CAB 1 each

Not answered / don't know 28 (highest among owner occupiers and the 45 - 59 age group)

Council Tax (of 86)

GBC 53; Council list 11; NMW 5; Relative 4; Phone Book 2; EMH, Directory enquiries, CAB 1 each

Not answered / don't know 8

Crime and disorder (of 93)

Police 52; GBC 14; Council list 7, NMW 3; GBC or police, Relative 2 each, Social Services, EMH, Directory enquiries 1 each

Not answered / don't know 10

Housing Repairs (of 82)

GBC 12; Private company 9; Council list 6; EMH 5; NMW 3; Relative 2; Yellow Pages, Phone Book, Warden, Directory enquiries, Landlord 1 each

Not answered / don't know 40

Pest Control (of 91)

GBC 49; Council list 9; Private company 4; NMW 3; EMH, Relative, Phone Book 2 each; GBC website, Friends, Warden, NCC, Councillor, GBC / NCC, Directory enquiries 1 each

Not answered / don't know 13

Leisure (of 98)

GBC 18, Council list 11, Hucknall LC, NMW 6 each; Phone Book 3; Relative, Leisure Centre, ADC, Sutton LC, Internet, Yellow Pages 2 each; GP, Parish Council, GBC website, Directory enquiries, Hucknall Library, Library / newspaper, Newspaper 1 each

Not answered / don't know 35

Bus Pass (of 93)

GBC 30; Council list 11; NMW 4; NCC, Relative 2; Bus Company , Bus websites, Directory enquiries, Post Office 1 each

Not answered / don't know 40

Homeless Advice (of 99)

GBC 29, Council list 10; NMW, CAB 5 each; Relative 4; Social Services 3; EMH, Phone Book 2 each; YMCA, Job Centre, Housing Aid (Nottingham) 1 each

Not answered / don't know 36

Parking Fine (of 100)

GBC 17, Read ticket 10, Council list 9, Police 6, NMW, Relative 3 each; ADC 2, Friend, Phone Book, RAC, Directory enquiries 1 each

Not answered / don't know 46

9b. Thinking about the services that you have not used during the last year, who would you contact if you needed them? Card shown

Missed Bin (of 95)

GBC 67; Council list 10; NMW 4; Relative, Phone Book 2 each; Warden, Yellow Pages, Directory enquiries 1 each

Not answered / don't know 7

Bulky Waste collection (of 95)

GBC 60; Council list 11; NMW 3; Private arrangement, Relative 2 each; Warden 1

Read bin, Read leaflet, Phone Book, Private company, Directory enquiries 1
 Not answered / don't know 11
Social Services (of 97)
 Social Services 26; GBC 17; Council list 11; NMW 7; Relative, DHSS 3 each; Warden, CAB, Phone Book 2 each; PFA, NCC Civil Rights, Councillor, GBC / Police, Directory enquiries, GBC (will transfer call), HLC 1 each
 Not answered / don't know 17
Disabled Badge (of 98)
 GBC 28; Council list 11; Social Services, NMW, Relative, NCC 4 each; GP, CAB, DHSS 2 each; Yellow Pages, Phone Book, ADC, Directory enquiries, Hospital, GP / GBC, Friend 1 each
 Not answered / don't know 30
Free School Meals (of 97)
 GBC 14; Council list 9; School 7; NMW 3; Social Services, Relative 2 each; Education Department, Phone Book, ADC, School / ADC, NCC, Nottingham City Council*, Directory enquiries, NCC / School 1 each
 Not answered / don't know 52
 * Respondent's child attends school in Nottingham
Schools Information (of 98)
 School 28; GBC 10; Council list 8; NMW 3; Relative, NCC 2 each; Education Department, Internet, Yellow Pages, Directory enquiries 1 each
 Not answered / don't know 41
Child Minders (of 100)
 GBC 11; Council list 9; NMW, Childminder 5 each; Social Services 3; Relative, Phone Book 2 each; Child minder / Surestart, Playgroup, NCC, DHSS, Directory enquiries, Surestart, Yellow Pages 1 each
 Not answered / don't know 56

39 respondents did not know about the monthly Housing Benefit surgeries held at Newstead Miners Welfare including 5 of the 7 Council tenants.

10. Do you know about the monthly Housing Benefit Surgeries?	Frequency
Yes	39
No	61

Telephone enquiries to Gedling Borough Council

46 respondents had contacted Gedling Borough Council by telephone during the previous 12 months, 26 via the switchboard. They were asked about the most recent call that they made.

11. Respondents who contacted Gedling Borough Council by phone during the previous 12 months Thinking about the last time that you contacted Gedling Borough Council by phone, was it to ...	Frequency
The Councils switchboard	26
A direct line at the Council Offices	20
A Council owned facility (such as a Leisure Centre)	0

Respondents were asked whether their call was answered promptly. 42 said that it was - 1 couldn't remember and another reached a voicemail.

12. Was the call answered promptly?	Frequency
Yes	42
No	2
Voicemail	1
Can't remember	1

Table 13 shows the response to the call received by callers to the switchboard or a direct line.

13. Did the person who answered your call ...	The Councils Switchboard	A direct line at the Council Offices
Answer you query immediately	1	13
Transfer the call	24	1
Answer your call by phoning back	0	2
Unable to help	0	3
Gave a different number to call	1	0
Not answered (voicemail)	0	1

1 of the 25 calls which were transferred was to an incorrect number.

14. If Transferred: Was this to ...	Frequency
The correct Department	22
An answering machine	2
Incorrect number	1

Table 15 shows the experiences of callers who were transferred.

From tables 13 and 15 it is apparent that of the 46 callers questioned, 35 had their enquiries dealt with immediately or immediately after being transferred and 3 through a Council Officer calling them back.

15. If transferred: Did the person that you were transferred to ...	Frequency
Answer your query immediately	21
Transfer the call	1
Answer your call by phoning back	1
Unable to help	1
Gave a different number	0
Answering machine	1

Sample sizes are too small for a reliable breakdown of responses. However 14 of 21 male callers phoned the switchboard compared to 12 of 25 females. 16 of the 23 who were under 45 years old phoned the switchboard, as did 7 of 14 between 45 and 59 and 3 of 9 who were 60 or over.

The 3 respondents called back were all males between 25 and 44 years old. Of 4 respondents who were not helped 3 were female.

80 of 97 (82%) respondents who had ever contacted the Council by phone had never hung up because of the time taken to answer the call.

16. When phoning Gedling Borough Council, have you ever hung up because of the time taken to answer the phone?	Frequency
Not answered	3
Yes	17
No	80

81 respondents said that there was never a situation in which Gedling Borough Council was not able to deliver a service when they needed help. 13 of 55 females (24%) and 4 of 39 males (9%) had been unable to receive a service at least once.

17. When you have needed help from Gedling Borough Council, has there ever been a situation when you could not receive services?	Frequency
Not answered	2
Yes	17
No	81

Table 18 shows the reason that services were not received.

18. (If yes) What was the reason?	Frequency
Unable to contact Council	1
Did not reply to Council information request	0
Could not get to offices	0
Other (say)	15
Other: Not actioned 6; Council policy 2; Not actioned or call returned, GBC didn't respond to letter (Issue - unable to pay Council Tax), Failed to return call (HB dispute), Pest Control wouldn't deal with rats, Refuse collectors won't lift a bin up steps, No one arrived at HB surgery, Delay in returning call, Doubt over whether GBC or ADC should deal with litter on Hucknall Road 1 each	
Unable to contact Council: Phone contact to make Council Tax payment took too long	

19. Which of the following facilities would you use to contact the Council if they were made available?	Frequency
Not answered (i.e. none)	49
A local surgery with a Council Officer	34
Internet application forms (for example for benefit applications)	24
Text messaging	8
Video conferencing with a Council Officer from a booth at Newstead Miners Welfare	3

49 who didn't respond preferred to contact the Council by phone or visit.

Respondents aged 60 or over were unlikely to use Video Conferencing, Internet application forms or Text messaging and more likely than average to use a Local surgery or to not use any of these services.

The 3 respondents who would use Video conferencing were all female.

10 (59%) of those who had hung up when trying to phone the Council would use one of the services offered including 6 who would use the internet. 10 of the 17 who had been unable to receive help or a service from the Council would use a service, including 8 who would use a Local surgery.

A number of respondents made additional comments.

Comments

GBC should have a gardening service; all services are available through Newstead Miners Welfare. Council services are good but staff attitudes are poor - sometimes they are rude. Litter is a problem and speeding traffic a danger. It should be easier to contact the Council out of office hours; Newstead is seen as a low priority by GBC. More information and availability needed out of office hours. People are reluctant to use the Housing Benefit surgery because of worries about confidentiality; a private room is needed. GBC are good if you are polite to them. I'm glad that Newstead is part of Gedling because GBC is a good Council. GBC should keep the Parish Council well informed. The repairs service is poor and under funded. The bus stop is too far away; facilities for the elderly are poor - these were promised at NMW. More information and help is needed with benefits. It is possible to receive help at Newstead Miners Welfare. New tenants cause instability in the community. Most decisions on priorities for Newstead should be taken locally; GBC should become more involved in local bodies by attending village meetings. Newstead has poor services, but the GBC response is fine. It's easier to visit GBC. GBC gave me excellent advice. Newstead belongs with Ashfield; it is difficult to visit Arnold by public transport.

Conclusions

The survey was complicated by the fact that a few respondents relied on relatives or partners to contact the Council and other agencies.

Among those interviewed were at least three Parish Councillors, who were well informed about how to deal with particular issues.

Most respondents seemed aware of the Council's responsibilities, willing to contact the Council as and when necessary and to have received a good service when they have done so.

My estimate would be that the Council would expect to receive about 350 enquiries or requests for a service per year from the village. Of these a proportion are likely to continue to be by telephone (for example a missed bin).

There are particular issues in the village, some of which are within the remit of the Council.

Pest Control is clearly an issue, as is the replacement of damaged bins - the Council charges for a replacement, which is resented by residents who claim that their bins were damaged by the Refuse Collectors. This would seem to be a matter of policy rather than administration.

Another issue within the Councils remit is leisure. There is a feeling that there is a shortage of facilities within the village, and residents are understandably more likely to use facilities in Ashfield, which are closer and easier to reach than Gedlings facilities.

Other issues are public transport, the lack of shopping facilities and facilities for young people.

Newstead Miners Welfare provides facilities including an advice centre and would be used as a first point of contact by some residents. However I do not believe that this would be true of all residents.

It would seem that there are resources in the village (such as the Miners Welfare and associated agencies and Parish Councillors) that can enable some residents to access services more easily than might otherwise be the case, or is the case in some other parts of the Borough. One respondent suggested that working with local organisations and attending local meetings is of more value than a regular surgery.

The Council's list of phone numbers has been retained by a number of residents who use this as a first point of reference for any questions or problems that they might have including those which might come within the remit of other Councils (such as the County Council) or agencies.

In addition to this is the Council's Contact magazine; leaflets and stickers on bins provide information to residents.

24% of respondents to the survey said that they would use Internet application forms to contact the Council.

In 2001 I carried out a Borough wide Communications Survey (known at the Council as an 'Gedling 500'). Among the 500 respondents 43% had access to the Internet, highest among owner occupiers (47%) and higher among residents of the Parishes (54%) than the urban area. Only 5 respondents lived at Newstead, of which 4 had Internet access (a high level but from a sample that is statistically of no value).

This survey found that a majority of households (52%) had internet access including 56% of owner occupiers. 9 of 24 respondents living in social housing (37.5%) and 9 of 21 (43%) who were in social housing that was not Warden Aided were households in which at least one member had internet access.

It would seem to me that either Internet use in Newstead is relatively high (which seems unlikely) or that Internet use has increased over a period of nearly four years since the Communications Survey.

The proportion of respondents who said that they would use internet application forms was 24% which represents a majority of those who were both members of households with internet access and who had the skills to use it. Contacting the Council by e-mail was not offered as an option.

I would regard the growth of the Internet and desire of respondents to use it to communicate with the Council difficult to ignore.

The proportion of respondents who said that they would use regular surgeries with a Council Officer was just over one third. This may be worthy of consideration; although it is unclear to what extent this would overlap existing services. Many respondents said that they would contact Newstead Miners Welfare or the CAB to deal with issues, although none said that they had done so. It is possible that some contacted the Council after receiving informal advice at NMW.

Recommendations:

Council Officers to attend as many village meetings and functions as possible

To develop the Councils accessibility through its web site and e-mail

To consider holding surgeries at Newstead Miners Welfare

To consider ways of promoting and encouraging retention of the Councils telephone list

ACCESS STRATEGY

1. Background

As part of this Council's commitment to electronic service delivery, a joint review between Officers and Members has been carried out to consider how the customer interacts with the Council, their experiences and how improvements can be made. The Council offers a wide range of services to the customer and this strategy is about how these are delivered.

The use of the term 'customer' in a local government context can be viewed as inappropriate, especially when the interaction is in relation to enforcement action. However it is a universally recognised term and implies a relationship of respect where the Council is delivering services to high standards and where there is choice.

There is particular emphasis on electronic delivery as this represents the means by which access can be extended, where speed can be improved and where efficiencies can be made. However it has to be acknowledged that not all customers are able, or do not wish, to access services electronically and this access strategy aims to ensure that contact channels are available for everyone in the borough to find a means which suits them.

1.1. Definitions

The Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) funding received from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) over the past 3 years and for the next year has been targeted at improving electronic service delivery, and the emphasis now embedded in the National Priorities is to improve customer access and service delivery. The ODPM have defined a number of electronic access routes which they are expecting Councils to explore these are:

- Digital TV
- PCs
- Telephones
- Mobile Devices (mobile telephones, SMS, email)
- Kiosks

In addition there are the more traditional access channels which need to be considered in a full access strategy, these include:

- Face to face
- Mail – process for dealing with this are well established and this strategy does not cover this in any detail

The working group also identified a key access channel, which it was felt was uniquely identifiable and should be recognised in its own right. Some of our customers need to use 'intermediaries' to access our services. These might be relatives or friends; other services e.g. Social Services or local representatives for example Councillors. They may depend on these people to contact the Council on

their behalf for information or access a service directly. This form of service access has been separately recognised within this strategy.

1.2. Geography

In determining its access strategy, the Council needs to have regard to the geography and accessibility around the Borough. Of particular relevance are the public transport routes, which enable people to access services at different locations. It is recognised that public transport access across the borough is restricted as most public transport goes into the centre of Nottingham (north to south) rather than between points in the Borough i.e. east to west.

1.3. Demography

The access strategy also needs to recognise the demographics of the borough and how these might impact on the solutions chosen. Some of the relevant data to be taken into account in determining the relative priorities of access channels are:

16.9% of the population is 65 or over – this might have implications for PC and mobile device use, also for mobility [Census 2001]

22.5% of the population is under 19 – this group generally have good IT skills and these access channels are particularly suited to delivering services specific to young people [Census 2001]

52% of the population do have Internet access, and this is a potential target group for some services [National figure]

The number of people currently claiming Housing/Council Tax Benefit is 7,500 and these people will have regular contact with the Council to either make or update benefit claims.

2. Current Situation

At the present time the Council actively uses the following access channels:

One Stop Shop – a major investment with IEG funding to provide a facility at the Civic Centre where all customer queries could be responded to at one point. Its main functions, which are covered, include Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Housing repairs and general queries, Planning application submission and enquiry. There is a project planned for 2005/06, which will incorporate the reporting of missed bins and arrangements for collection of bulky household waste in this service. Specifically excluded from the service are electoral roll enquiries, homelessness and licensing.

Telephones – the Council has a direct dial switchboard which enables customers to contact extension numbers directly. This can lead to numbers being engaged or not picked up if staff are not available. There is a one general number for the Council, but also a published list within Contacts of 60 numbers relating to specific services. A survey carried out in July 2001 for a Best Value review of communications indicated that some 67% of people contacted the Council by telephone.

Cemetery Lodge – there is an Information Centre based at Cemetery Lodge in Carlton. This is a small office, which offers a limited service of Housing Benefit and Council Tax advice, issuing of bus passes, and taking Housing Repairs. It does not offer the full range of One Stop Shop services and is limited in its opening hours to closing at 4.00pm. It is also not in a main shopping or services centre so does not fully serve a geographic area. Neither does it take payments therefore its services are restricted.

Payments – these can be made at the Civic Centre or through Post Offices throughout the Borough where payment cards can be used. As far as possible the Council encourages Direct Debit for the payment of Council Tax and Housing Rent can be paid by Standing Order.

Surgeries – the Council has for some years provided monthly Housing Benefit advice surgeries in Newstead. The take-up has been low, and the services offered are restricted.

Internet – the Council has an active website which is being improved through the BV157, service interaction process. There is considerable information and advice available on the website, however it is felt that this is not presented in a customer friendly way, and therefore not used to its maximum potential.

With respect to improving electronic service delivery in general, the Council is investing in an Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS). This will provide the ability to scan in all documents and to link them to other electronic records, e.g. Housing Benefits. At the present time, most electronic systems rely on paper based filing systems to back up the information, which is stored electronically. Once the EDRMS is fully implemented and sufficient data is stored on it, it will be possible to deliver more services remotely and not depend on access to paper files to give information, advice or decisions. The programme for implementing EDRMS extends over 2004 – 2007 to include all services.

3. Approach to developing the Strategy

The Resources and Management Scrutiny Committee had established a working group for the implementation of the One Stop Shop and it was agreed that this group of Elected Members would continue to work with the Officers to establish an overall Access Strategy. The initial work was to consider from the perspective of the customer how each of the defined access channels best met either a service or a customer need. The analysis of this work was reported to Resources and Management Scrutiny Committee.

In addition they commissioned a survey of residents in Newstead so that they could further understand how people in a community with poor transport links and a high level of deprivation felt they would like to communicate with the Council. The conclusions of the survey have been considered and reported to Resources and Management Scrutiny Committee.

4. Evaluation of Access Channels

It was evident from the evaluation work, that the One Stop Shop is felt to be the most effective access channel in terms of providing customer service, although the most frequently used channel by the public is the telephone. The One Stop Shop is accessible to the greatest numbers of customers and offers the widest range of services from a single point of contact. However its limitations were also recognised since it did not serve those without access to transport.

The second access channel, which was felt to address the largest number of needs, was through telephone. The use of the telephone meets the needs of those who are making enquiries, but is not suited where advice is needed or forms need to be completed (e.g. benefits). It is also only accessible to those who are confident telephone users. The current telephone access channel is limited by reference to each specific service and does not cater well for those who have multiple enquiries.

The Internet offers the Council an extremely cost effective access channel as there are no additional costs as numbers using it rise. Considerable investment is being made through the e-government funding and the commitment to deliver priority services in the website. The Newstead research showed that 52% of respondents were in a household with access to the Internet, 45% had the skills themselves to use it, and 24% said they would use the Internet to make online applications for services. This suggests that the Internet as an access channel is growing in popularity, and becoming a normal means of interaction for large numbers of the population.

Our internet site is developing rapidly. There is a growing amount of information on the site. Outline forms to enable customers to send in requests are being developed and as new IT systems are being procured and deployed these are web enabled, for example the Committee Administration System. However, it has to be recognised that this channel is only available to those with computer access and knowledge, and this will tend to disproportionately preclude the elderly and disadvantaged. This channel will not in the medium term replace the other possible channels.

The evaluation carried out by the Working Group suggested that surgeries were in general one of the least effective access channels. This was because they were only available at designated times and only provided one service. This does not provide for the needs of those who need assistance urgently and can not wait until the next surgery date. The 'Newstead survey' suggested that 34% of people would use this option, but evidence indicates that they are not well used. There is possibly a difference between the preference and the reality. Surgeries, even when delivering multi-services, are inevitably restricted because the Officer will not have access to all the information which is currently paper based. As EDRMS rolls out across the Council this will improve, and if the appropriate technology links can be put in then it will be possible for Officers to deliver multi-service surgeries using mobile technology at a number of locations across the Borough. However at the present time this is not fully available and any surgery offering will inevitably be restricted.

The Cemetery Lodge Information Office was viewed as a fairly successful Access Channel, but its limitations were also recognised in that it only offers limited services, and is not well placed geographically to reach a wide range of people. Analysis of visitors demonstrates that the largest number of enquiries are related to benefits. The Officers at the Information Centre can access the

benefits system, give general benefits advice and receive the claim form. Until EDRMS is in place their advice will be limited as they are unable to see all the relevant documents. It is also evident that the greatest number of users are from Carlton (60%) which is unsurprising given the location of Cemetery Lodge. Only 13% of users are from Netherfield and the remaining 27% from other locations. However the overall visitor numbers are very low, averaging 24 per day. This compares to the average visitor numbers in the One Stop Shop of 134 per day.

5. Strategic – Key Issues

In developing the strategy the key issues to address are:

How can services be provided so that the customer gets as much assistance as possible at one point?

How can services be provided so that the customer can access them in the most convenient way possible?

Council's budgets are limited for expansion of any service, so improvements will need to be contained within existing resources.

How can Information and Communication Technology (ICT) be used to best effect?

6. Strategic Vision

The vision for Customer Access is that:

Everyone in the borough will be able to access information and advice on all services at a time, in a place and in a way that is suited to their circumstances.

This is very challenging but gives direction to the necessary decisions, which need to be taken to make improvements.

7. Strategic Aims

The vision will be delivered by meeting the following aims:

- 1. ICT will be used to maximum effect in delivering services*
- 2. Multi-service delivery to be offered where possible*
- 3. To reduce the need for customers to travel distances to access face to face service*
- 4. To be cost effective in developing access channels*

These strategic aims suggest that the Council will prioritise its development of Access Channels in the following order:

1. Use of the internet to encourage customers as far as possible to resolve queries or to seek out information from this source
2. Use of the telephone to deliver a One Stop Shop service again answering queries and for information. The website will be key in enable the Telephone Advisors to access the information for customers
3. One Stop Shop – this is a well developed concept which can continue to be enhanced and sets a model for multi-service delivery
4. Intermediaries – using other people to deliver our services, or to signpost customers from a remote location, for example County Contact, Netherfield Reception etc. Again intermediaries would use the website to find out information and with an understanding of our services, direct customers accordingly
5. Visits to customers – this is a very expensive means of service delivery, tying up officer time on a one to one basis, and where they may not have access to all the information. However in some circumstances, this will be the primary means of delivering services to those who cannot physically access services outside the home.

8. Strategic Priorities

To deliver the aims above the following areas for action are proposed:

1. *Using the Internet to the maximum for providing information, advice and services.*

The research from Newstead demonstrated that there is increasing access to the Internet and increasing interest in using this route to obtain services. The Best Value Performance Indicator – BV157 is about electronically enabling as many interactions as possible. Considerable progress is being made towards the target of 100%, and particular improvements have been made in the provision of information on the website. Electronic service delivery is extremely cost effective, and this strategy supports driving as much service as possible to the Internet. This not only includes the customer having access to information but also employees.

The primary priority of this strategy is therefore to develop the website to be the first point of contact for the customer and the more information and services which can be provided this way, the more other resources are released to support those services and customers for whom this medium is not appropriate.

There is to be a corporate review of the structure of the website during spring of 2005. This will be to ensure that it is more customer-focussed and to facilitate access to the services which are on it. This will lead to a re-designing of the site with greater clarity about where services can be found. The Council has also purchased some software, which can be used to create on-line forms. This can be used for service requests, which can be electronically submitted, and the relevant Officer emailed with the form to then take action.

Through the requirements of the Pendleton Report and the recent Audit Commission Best Value Service Review of Planning Services, there is an action plan to implement 'end-to-end' planning which enables the customer to electronically submit a planning application, for this then to be viewed through the website and for comments to be electronically submitted.

Attached as Appendix A are a series of services standards for dealing with electronic contacts, which in effect will be email notifications. Adoption of these will meet the National Priorities and will also clarify web access as a service channel and ensure that this is dealt with consistently and to high standards.

2. Investigating the potential for delivering a One Stop Shop approach to the receiving of telephone enquiries and other face to face contacts

Following a recent seminar, there is to be a review of how Customer Services are delivered across the Council. This will look at the best way of structuring this service delivery and will address both the face-to-face contact and telephone enquiries. This would address the 80% of contact, which is through the telephone.

The National e-government priorities are guiding the Council towards investing in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, which is a means by which customer contacts can be recorded and managed. There is budgetary provision for replacing the telephone switchboard, providing integrated telephony and a CRM system. The review of Customer Services will provide the foundation for determining what system might bring about the most benefits and to start the process of procurement and implementation, possibly in partnership with other Councils.

3. Effective channels for taking payments

Currently payments can be made at the Civic Centre, Post Offices, by telephone (24 hours) and Internet. Taking payments at non-secure locations has implications for the safety and security of staff and money. The preferred option for payment is by direct debit as this is most cost effective. However it is recognised that this is not suitable for all customers and the alternatives are offered. As a strategy it is proposed that customers are encouraged towards existing channels, direct debit and telephone/internet payments as a preference. A longer-term aim would be to reduce the need to take cash payments directing all payments to either electronic systems or using the Post Office payment card.

4. Cemetery Lodge

It is recognised that this access channel serves a particular purpose within the area it is located, but this is restricted both in terms of range of service and reach. Given the priorities for directing access to the Internet and Civic Centre One Stop Shop, it is not felt to be appropriate to develop this service any further. The services offered will continue whilst it remains viable to do so. It is possible that other locations may present themselves for locating this service e.g. the LIFT PCT building in Carlton. These will be explored as opportunities arise and where some of the difficulties with Cemetery Lodge can be addressed.

5. Ease of issue of bus passes

One of the major services offered to customers is the issuing of bus passes, currently done at the One Stop Shop and Cemetery Lodge. The possibility of using remote technology to take identity

photographs to be explored so that this service can be offered either at surgeries or through other outlets, e.g. St George's Centre Netherfield to make this more convenient for customers.

6. Pilot Multi-service surgeries

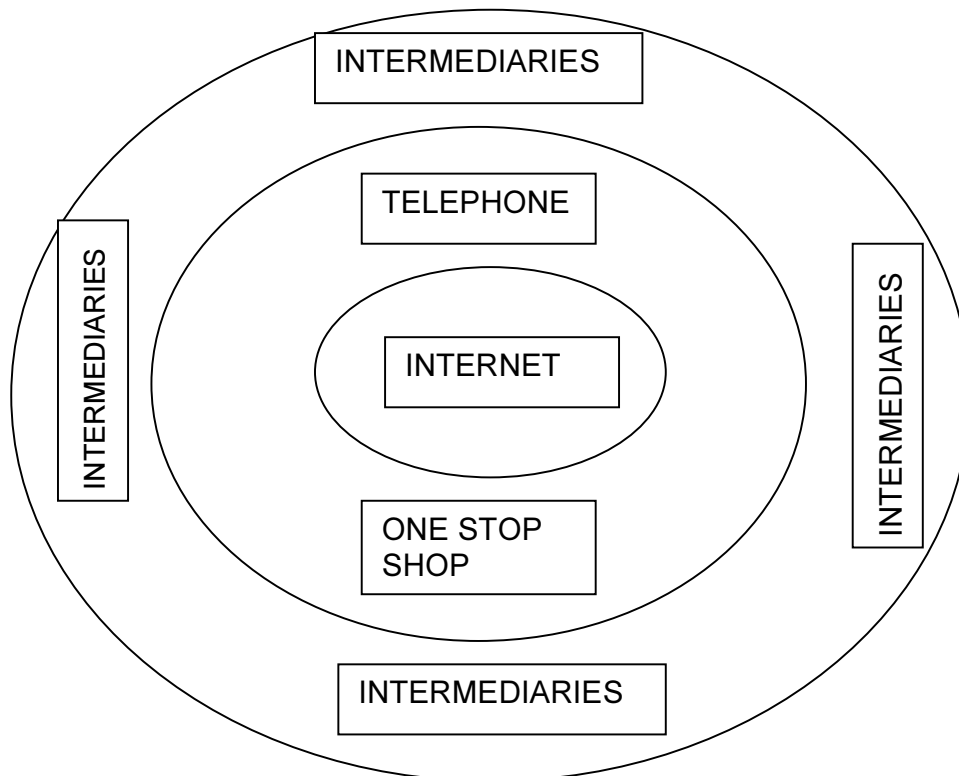
Once the EDRMS system is embedded in Benefits and Council Tax, it would be possible to consider running surgeries around the borough using remote access technologies. These surgeries would be in the places where access to the Civic Centre is difficult and there is sufficient demand either in terms of size of population or use of services. This is a longer-term aspect of the strategy and it is proposed that consideration be given to running a pilot programme in the medium term (3-5 years). However if the take up of this service is low and not cost effective then as part of the access strategy it would be valid to determine that this channel would not form a permanent part of the strategy.

7. Other Access Channels to be viewed as low priority for investigation.

In section 1.1 above there is reference to the ODPM's list of potential access channels, from the work carried out to develop this Access Strategy and the evaluation of relevant channels it is proposed that investing in SMS technology, digital TV and kiosks are not pursued at this time. There is no demonstrable evidence that they will significantly enhance service delivery over the other areas identified above.

Interaction Structure

Diagrammatically the access strategy can be represented



8. Review

This strategy has been set for the next 3 years. This will enable the Council to concentrate on the three main access channels of the Internet, telephone and the One Stop Shop, to develop these services and to consolidate its approach to customer services. However by 2008, it will be appropriate to review both the success of these channels and to consider further developments as suggested above.

9. Summary

There are two main strands of the Council's Access Strategy for the next 3 years:

- Driving as much service and information access as possible through the website
- Trial the development of the One Stop Shop at the Civic Centre to determine the most appropriate route to deliver both telephone and further face-to-face services.

In this respect there will be no further investment in other types of access channel for the duration of this strategy. The Council will be developing a Customer Service approach, which will inform the review of this strategy in 3 years' time.

Appendix A

Electronic Service Standards

Responding to service requests, which are received electronically, should not be in any way an inferior service to requests received by traditional means. However, there are some specific standards which apply to electronic services, these are defined below so that customers, Elected Members and all staff are aware of these.

- Any emails received will be responded to within 10 working days (as for written communications), unless they are Freedom of Information or Data Protection requests which will be dealt with under legislative requirements
- All emails will receive an automatic acknowledgment to reassure the customer that it has been received and to provide further contact information including telephone numbers
- When an email request is received within the Council it will be treated with equal urgency to other requests
- Email requests will normally be responded to electronically rather than through traditional forms
- Every service area will have a 'service specific' email address to receive electronic requests
- The service specific email box will be advertised on the relevant service page(s) of the website
- This address box will be monitored daily by the service to ensure that requests are dealt with

These service standards do not apply to emails received from organisations selling goods and services