SATELLITE ONE-STOP SHOPS (JUN 2006)

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Foreword by the Panel Chair

At a work programme meeting in June 2003, the cabinet member for Customer Services, Mark Allison, asked that scrutiny councillors consider carrying out a review on the subject of satellite one stop shops. The aim was to see if there is a need for one stop shops in Merton to make it easier for residents to access council services. This issue is related to Merton's Community Plan, particularly with reference to the corporate priorities of

- Equalities Merton: full and equal access to services
- Equalities Merton: introduce changes to develop easier community access to services.
- Effective Merton: become a learning, listening and innovative organisation, focussing on customers and what matters

The task group has studied best practice from a number of Boroughs across London and elsewhere in England. We have also interviewed residents coming to Merton Link to hear their views on establishing satellite one stop shops. One problem with consulting is that it is impossible to say the cost: people are positive towards improvements in customer services, but what if this would incur higher council tax? We have tried to balance our discussions with this in mind.

The panel unanimously agreed that it is not yet time to consider satellite one stop shops in Merton, but that they should be considered agenda again in a nubmer of years' time. We primarily want to give Merton Link the opportunity to develop and cater for the needs of the residents before – perhaps – embarking on establishing satellites.

A large number of people have contributed to this review and I would like to thank everybody for their support.

Councillor Leighton Veale
Chair, the Way We Work Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The Way We Work Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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Introduction

At the scrutiny work programme planning meeting on 3 June 2003, the cabinet member for Customer Services, Mark Allison, asked that scrutiny councillors consider carrying out a review on the subject of satellite one stop shops. Such a review falls under the remit of the Way We Work panel. The review was measured against scrutiny's criteria for a review[1] and was found to meet all criteria. Reviews shall

- ✓ contribute to corporate objectives/community plan
- ✓ be a significant issue in terms of its effect on local people
- ✓ not replicate work already carried out
- ✓ be specific in aim
- ✓ carry an opportunity for improved performance
- ✓ be achievable
- ✓ engage the public
- ✓ be balanced in terms of departments involved and client groups (i.e. reviews being carried out on the other panels are not calling on the same council departments/ users for assistance/consultation)

At the Overview and Scrutiny Commission meeting on 29 July 2003, members agreed that the Way We Work panel would be asked to carry out this review. The interest of Commission members in this area was shared by members of the panel,

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[1] As agreed at the Commission meeting of 10 June 2003

who at their last meeting in June asked that the issue of customer access should be the first item on their agenda at the next meeting.

Recommendations

The task group recommends that
1. satellite one stop shops are not considered for the council at the moment, but that they should be reconsidered in 2-3 years' time.
2. The service of filling out forms that libraries undertake should be marketed more, e.g. by putting up signs in the libraries.
3. Merton Link takes the opportunity to consider if there is any point in staying open late one night of the week or opening on Saturday morning.
4. the council generally encourages the public to use IT and phones.
5. a directory of council staff is printed and put in libraries as well as departmental e-mail addresses.

1.0 Why satellite one stop shops?

Cabinet Member, Cllr Mark Allison, suggested the review for a number of reasons. Essentially it is about improving the accessibility of council services (customer services aspect), enabling those who find it difficult and expensive to get to the Civic Centre to deal with matters locally (equalities aspect), to provide a Council 'presence' in local areas – thus making the Council less 'remote' (the Council in the community aspect). The issues touch on key Council themes.

The suggestion that scrutiny carry out a review can be seen to for these more detailed reasons:

1. To satisfy the preference of roughly a quarter of people who have stated they prefer face-to-face contact in their dealings with the Council (found during the Best Value review in this area).
2. To respond to the equality issues of people who are not able to use ICT to access services or do not have the physical ability or money to come into the Civic Centre.
3. To provide a means of encouraging people to use other council services or engage in the work of a council. For instance, at the moment a person may need to pay a parking fine and choose to do so by post. But if they passed a satellite one stop shop they might choose instead to drop by and find:

☐ a poster telling them that their area forum is being held that week – and may then think about attending
☐ a leaflet about becoming a school governor or a mentor for a child with behavioural difficulties or that they might be eligible for Disability Living Allowance
☐ or if the satellite one stop shop was part of the local library, they might have a look at the books, which they might otherwise not have seen
☐ if it was placed at the same place as the recycling bank they might recycle more – or those recycling might choose to see in what ways the council can help them
☐ if the one stop shop was run in partnership with a supermarket, they could drop by before they do their weekly shop (though there are issues with seeming to encourage shopping outside of struggling neighbourhood shopping centres).

If satellite one stop shops were seen to be a good thing for Merton and did work well
we may find that more than just a quarter of people choose to use them. But why do we want more people to use them? It is more cost-efficient if people use other ways of paying their CT, asking for CTB and they could be encouraged too.

1.1 Community Plan and corporate priorities

The Community Plan includes as one of its top twenty issues to 'promote the development of local communities/sense of neighbourhood' and to 'restore a sense of civic pride'. These key aims of the plan could be seen to be furthered by establishing one stop shops. Satellite one stop shops can be seen to be more directly related to the Council's corporate objectives – as set out in the Best Value Performance Plan 2003 - especially in the areas of:

- Thriving Merton: regeneration of town centres
- Equalities Merton: introduce changes to develop easier community access to services
- Equalities Merton: full and equal access to services
- Effective Merton: become a learning, listening and innovative organisation, focussing on customers and what matters

1.2 Context

A number of things that the Council has just done or is doing is relevant to this review. Stage 6 of a Best Value review into improving Customer Interface & Access to Services has just been completed and an action plan agreed. LB Merton is also in the process of carrying out a Best Value review of Council Accommodation, which may also have implications on a review of satellite one stop shops. Elsewhere in the authority officers are looking at ways of encouraging library visits and use of other council services or processes, such as area forums.

1.3 Terms of reference

1. What improvements are we trying to achieve in customer services?
2. What do we mean by satellite one stop shops? What do they look like? What functions do they perform?
3. What are the needs of local people in this area – of all groups including those disadvantaged or traditionally socially excluded? (Carry out a proper survey)
4. What is the demand in Merton for satellite one stop shops and possible future demand? (Do they match 1 above?)
5. To establish the possible benefits and pitfalls of creating satellite one stop shops in Merton
6. To assess the alternatives to one stop shops
7. To learn from good practice from other local authorities – what have they achieved? At what cost?
8. Are satellite one stop shops the best way of achieving what we are trying to achieve? How might they be adapted to suit Merton?
9. To recommend, if applicable, how satellite one stop shops might work most effectively in Merton
10. To recommend what additional or alternative measures should be taken in Merton to improve customer access

1.4 What is a satellite one stop shop?

Fundamental to one-stop-shops is the principle that enquiries come as the first point of contact – the aim is to deal with them on the spot. Traditionally satellite one-stop-shops are seen as places where residents can drop in to a small, council building close to their home for face-to-face assistance. Enquiries or problems come to the one-stop-shop as the first point of contact – the aim is to deal with them on the spot. We could be looking at a mini version of Merton Link where you could come and bring your application for housing benefit, pay your council tax and report an abandoned car at the same visit.

The review may decide that satellite one-stop-shop – if they were seen as the way forward – would not be a stand-alone dedicated council building. Other options may emerge in which a satellite one-stop-shop could be provided from within, a library, a doctor's surgery, a post office, a supermarket, a local housing office or using a mobile one-stop-shop.

According to the IdeA there are three standard models of one stop shops. Such models could of course apply to a satellite version.

The first model involves channelling all visitors to a small suite of front desks where their enquiry is logged onto a customer relationship management (CRM) system, and a service number allocated. The visitor is then seated until called by a member of staff to deal with the enquiry. In this model multi-knowledge staff will deal with all enquiry types, so reducing queues at specific service desks and overcoming historical functional boundaries.

The second model provides a series of functional service desks, for example council tax, benefits, environmental and planning. This includes a general enquiry desk for visitors who are unsure who best to approach. This can lead to excessive queuing at some service points whilst other are quiet. Staff retain their own functional discipline and are not transferred between service points.

In *the third model* visitors are asked to select a numbered ticket according to the type of enquiry – council tax, benefits etc. Visitors then remain seated until called to the appropriate service point in number order.

1.5 Alternatives to satellite one stop shops
Members may decide satellite one stop shops are not the best way to deal with the problems or issues the Council is trying to address in the area of customer access. They may find very different ways of addressing the needs of local people. Questions arise such as:

☐ Why do people prefer face-to-face contact? Might it be because they have had a bad experience on the phone – being left on hold, passed from extension number to extension number or just that the officer who can help is not available. Could the improvements to the contact centre help to solve these issues? Or might it be that they do not trust the council not to lose their letter in the post. Might it be an issue of reassurance and a facility that means a local library and register post for the council?

☐ Might it be that in fact people do not mind travelling to Merton but not on a weekday? If Merton Link was open until late they could pop by on their way home after work. Or if it was open on a Saturday they would not have to make a special trip in the week and could do it while they shopped.

☐ Of if the call centre was open until 8pm a member of the public would not have to pay expensive daytime phone rates. Or that they do not like calling in the day from work because their boss frowns on making personal calls in work time and would prefer to wait until they get home after 6pm.

☐ Or that people would be more than happy to use Merton Link if there was a guarantee that they would not have to wait. A bleeper could be handed out and they could leave the Civic Centre and wait to be told when they can be helped. (NHS Outpatient Services have started to look at the idea of bleepers. It is also commonly used at restaurants in the US so that you can go for a wander awaiting a table to be free.)

☐ It is also worth thinking about how many people will still prefer getting face-to-face help in a number of years' time. Many younger people prefer using ICT to pay for council tax e.g. and it is likely that the pressure on Merton Link will decrease over time, just like more and more people prefer to use Internet banking instead of actually going to the bank.

These and other alternatives should be considered.

1.6 Implications of satellite on stop shops
In order to deal with enquiries at a satellite one stop shop there will be a need for strong communication between the one stop shop and the 'back office', i.e. the people on the upper floors of the Civic Centre who may have to be involved in the processing of enquiries made at the one stop shop.

Merton Link found that there was a need for enhanced training so that 'counter' staff know for instance what can be accepted as evidence in support of a housing benefit application. There would be a need for scanning facilities so that application forms of 'evidence' could be e-mailed to the Civic Centre or a central database. This may require a great deal of technology and capacity issues may arise that have to be tackled before a satellite one stop shop could be operational.

1.7 How evidence was gathered
The task group has had 4 meetings during the autumn and winter 2003/04.

2.0 Examples of good practice from other Boroughs
Some authorities already have satellite one stop shops. Their experiences of these vary and are worth keeping in mind.

2.1 Brent
* six one stop shops
* disabled access, loop system, minicom facility, interpreters and translation service
* private interview room
* leaflets and publications
* open 8am to 8pm, looking to Saturday 9am to 1pm
* contact centre has a dedicated Gujarati line
* has an E-shop and is developing intelligent online forms and software that automatically generates e-mails and letters to other sections on behalf of the customer and dates for the next action is flagged up
* Discussing with Brent, it was pointed out that once you set up satellite one stop shops, there's pressure not to close them down, "It's very hard to close the lid once you've opened it". They do "create their own demand". "There would be uproar if we closed one", the task group was told.

2.2 Cambridgeshire County Council
* five one stop shops in libraries
* IT based rather than face-to-face
* gives Internet and free telephone access to council services and NHS Direct
* demonstrated need for lots more interactive services to be available on the council's website

- huge survey found strong support for e-government locally, but the main reason users gave for not using the Internet was privacy in terms of people looking over their shoulder; also that they would be more likely to use it if portal or e-government services were located at places they frequently used such as the post office, bank or building society, supermarket and doctor's surgery in addition to libraries.
- survey also found 'the major lesson Cambridgeshire has learnt is not to make assumptions concerning their citizen's needs. The council must carry out adequate research into customer needs including all community groups such as elderly, young, disabled, disadvantaged, rural/city bound, employed and unemployed'.

2.3 LB Lewisham
- the council is developing another 'AccessPoint' one stop shop in Deptford to mirror the facility in Catford that has been a success
- AccessPoint provides customers with access to over 40 services
- AccessPoint is one of 14 sites across the Borough which links customers to a wide range of services through Tellytalk, a video conferencing system providing touch screen access to 10 services provided by the Council and external partners including Lewisham College, the CAB and Child Support Agency.

2.4 Newcastle City Council
- a multi-agency, multi-partner approach in a single school setting
- this 'extended schools project' has been put in place to aid regeneration
- the focus is on 'the whole child' to increase community provision and support that will benefit the whole family and encourage the perception of the school as the heart of the community
- the extended schools one stop shop will become the focal point for service delivery focusing on special themes including raising academic achievement, adult training opportunities, access other health services, children and young people services, family support and social support. It will include a place to report housing repairs, speech therapists, health visitor, victim support, family mediation services, CAB surgeries, police community surgery, Workfinder project to help people get back into work or training.

2.5 LB Sutton
Members visited Sutton's Clockhouse one-stop-shop and were surprised to hear that they only get about two customers a day – even though it had been open for six weeks. This may of course be a matter for communication and not an indication of demand.

2.6 LB Wandsworth
The officer responsible made a pertinent point: do people really come to a one-stop-shop to do more than one item of business? They think not. They say you come to pay the council tax or to enquire about school admissions – in practice you're unlikely to want to do a number of things (and if you did perhaps you wouldn't mind travelling a little further).

3.0 Discussion

The task group agrees that we should work to make it easier for residents to get in touch with the council, but is not convinced that satellite one-stop-shops are the solution to this.

The customer services aspect: The panel is keen that we do improve accessibility to services and that residents are made aware of services available. Of course there are other ways of doing so than with a one-stop-shop. Members of the task group have said that if we "get Merton Link right first" and improve the performance of telephone answering it would perhaps improve customer services greater than would a satellite one stop shop.

Members were keen that the authority explores extended opening hours of Merton Link and the contact centre – perhaps as a pilot of one late evening a week and Saturday morning. There are many employed people in the Borough. It is reasonable to think that they may well find it convenient to carry out their business with the council when they are not at work.

Some members expressed an interest in the Council creating a directory of council staff available in libraries. It is recognised that because of staff turnover it would be difficult to keep this up-to-date. It was suggested that paper copies of the on-line A-Z be available in booklet form next to phones in libraries or other community outlets.

The equalities aspect: The task group wants to tackle some of the equalities issues that have arisen in the review. These include:
a) The cost of phone calls for people in low income households – especially when left on hold
b) The difficulty in getting to the civic centre for people with mobility problems
c) The preference for face to face contact for people who are not fluent in English or have speech problems (who prefer not to use the phone).

With each of these issues, it is not clear whether these would be better tackled through satellite one-stop shops. For example:
a) Could be tackled by providing freephones in libraries and more computers in libraries to access the council's internet
b) Could be tackled by improved phone service which makes Civic Centre visits unnecessary
c) Residents may find that travelling to the Civic Centre for translation and face-to-face contact is acceptable

Problems perhaps only arise for people with a combination of a), b) or c). For example – a resident with mobility problems who would prefer to use the telephone or with mobility problems without fluent English. It is impossible to say how many people this would involve.

3.1 Earlier consultation

In the 2001 project work that led to setting up Merton Link, two focus groups were set up. Group 1 comprised 11 people aged over 65 years (8 male and 3 female); Group 2 comprised a cross-section of 9 residents (6 male, 3 female), including people with a disability and members of ethnic minority communities.

The report noted that, "None of the people in the senior citizens' group felt there are significant problems for them accessing Council services." This was before Merton Link was established.

Across the two groups, "respondents did not feel that there are any significant barriers to people accessing the Council's services. They do not believe that there are major difficulties for any group, including the elderly, people with disabilities and members of ethnic minority communities. However, respondents feel that there is room for improvement in terms of access provision. They believe that if the proposed one Stop has the right number of well-trained staff then there could be many advantages. "

The focus group research also found that the groups most likely to still visit the Civic Centre or other council offices (even with a service available that could deal with queries over the phone), mirror the groups of respondents who are more likely to access information on council tax and benefits via a personal visit. For example respondents aged over 65 years, respondents who are retired or have health problems. The question is whether it is reasonable to ask them to come to the Civic Centre.

3.2 Reasonable travel time

Looking at reasonable travel distance, members looked at the time taken by public transport to get to the Civic centre in under an hour. Using Transport for London's Journey Planner (which includes waiting times for buses) it is estimated that all part of the Borough could reach the Civic Centre in under an hour. This is in contrast to some London boroughs that have one-stop-shops including Tower Hamlets.

The Council in the community aspect: There are other ways of achieving this – such as raising the profile of the Council and its services through the corporate Borough magazine, area forums, the Internet, libraries and press notices or advertisements in the local press. There seems little reason why satellite one stop shops should be the answer. Also, is we want to develop libraries as centres of community – and we already have them on high streets – why not enable them to be developed for this purpose?

4.0 Conclusion

The task group has not been able to consult fully – without balancing the benefit with a cost we cannot get a clear picture of demand. If asking whether residents want a one-stop-shop, they may well say 'yes' but if asking, 'would you like them even though there would be an additional £1 on council tax, the response might be different. It is an issue of priorities.

Before Merton Link was established, only 14% of residents in focus groups said that they would use the Civic Centre or other council offices if the council could deal with queries over the phone. Merton Link was established to cater for them – is there a need to do more for those 14%? How many of them live in areas difficult to get to the Civic Centre? What proportion of them would prefer to use telephone if the Council was trusted and able to efficiently deal with their enquiry over the phone?

The task group is thus not convinced that there is a demand for satellite one-stop shops in Merton. The Civic Centre is situated reasonably central in the Borough and

there are good bus services from all areas. We do not reject satellite one-stop shops; at least not yet. We recognise that there is work to be done in this area but would like to use the existing resources that we have got, i.e. give Merton Link more time to develop before – perhaps – extending the services. There are not resources to establish any satellite one stop shops at the moment and we also find that encouraging people to come to the Civic Centre may have other advantages. It is also questionable whether a satellite would be able to provide all services that Merton Link has and a satellite where everything cannot be dealt with is worse than no satellite.

4.1 Final recommendations
The task group recommends that
1. satellite one stop shops are not considered for the council at the moment, but that they should be reconsidered in 2-3 years' time.
2. The service of filling out forms that libraries undertake should be marketed more, e.g. by putting up signs in the libraries.
3. Merton Link takes the opportunity to consider if there is any point in staying open late one night of the week or opening on Saturday morning.
4. the council generally encourages the public to use IT and phones
5. a directory of council staff is printed and put in libraries as well as departmental e-mail addresses.