

Evaluation of the FirstStop information and advice service for older people, their families and carers

FirstStop Advice is a service providing information and advice about care and housing options in later life to older people, their families and carers.

The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research at the University of Cambridge is undertaking an independent evaluation of the *FirstStop* service.

This report details the initial findings of Phase 1 of the evaluation.

Key findings

- The analysis showed a positive picture of the service developing over 2009. There has been a continual increase in customer volumes, with a particularly strong rise in the number of people using the service from September to November. Customer volumes will exceed the targets agreed with Communities and Local Government (CLG), who have invested in the initiative.
- The evaluation found that customer satisfaction is high and the overwhelming majority of customers would recommend *FirstStop* to others.
- *FirstStop's* innovative use of the latest technology creates a seamless experience for customers. The system provides a 'one stop shop' for older people to access the information and advice they need on a broad range of subjects.
- It also generates considerable business efficiencies saving time and money for service providers. *FirstStop* was able to expand the service and rapidly reduce unit costs after the investment of CLG funding. The evaluation also found that *FirstStop* has the capacity further to reduce unit costs as the service expands and deals with more enquiries.
- New national partners are being linked to *FirstStop* in early 2010. This is expanding the specialist information and advice that can be provided to customers. *FirstStop* is establishing a number of local partnerships that are building capacity and providing services to older people at the local level.
- *FirstStop* successfully launched a national 'housing options' training programme, delivered at the local level, which has received positive feedback.
- *FirstStop* is an innovative initiative which is part of the policy agenda encouraging a shift to a culture of early preparation, prevention and self-help. The aim is to encourage older people to make necessary changes to their housing and care arrangements before they encounter a crisis.
- The information and advice delivered by *FirstStop* is helping people to resolve their housing problems in ways that are more satisfactory and empowering to them.
- The advice can also lower costs to the state. For example, the research suggests that many people are unaware of the home adaptations that are available as an alternative to more expensive residential care.

The research team

The evaluation is being conducted by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research at the University of Cambridge. For more information about the evaluation please contact Dr Gemma Burgess on 01223 764547 or by email: glb36@cam.ac.uk.

The need for information and advice

The National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society (CLG, 2008) argues that good housing and related support is imperative for wellbeing in later life and critical if the mounting pressures of health, care and support expenditure are to be managed. Over the last decade an agenda has been developing around preventing older people from moving into high support accommodation, such as residential care, at times of crisis. This type of accommodation is often very costly to both individuals and public finances.

There has been a recognised need for the provision of information and advice to assist older people in planning ahead, enabling them to remain independent and empowered. It has also been recognised that older people face problems that cut across housing, health, finance, care and their broader rights. *FirstStop* is testing the hypothesis that the approach of providing holistic information and advice can help prevent housing or care crises for older people and can generate financial savings for the public purse as well as for individuals.

What is *FirstStop*?

FirstStop's aims and objectives are:

- To provide a national information and advice service to the public using the web plus telephone advice.
- To enhance this service by developing partnerships with local agencies, with a particular emphasis on targeting hard-to-reach and minority ethnic groups.
- To deliver web-based information and a training programme for advisers and others.
- To move towards a national network of information and advice delivery agencies with a service that can be accessed via multiple entry points.
- To evaluate the service in order to make improvements and to assess its commercial potential.

FirstStop provides a national information and advice service for older people and their families and carers. The service, provided jointly by Counsel and Care, Elderly Accommodation Counsel, Age UK and NHFA, brings together the expertise of each organisation. Customers reach the service through one telephone number and one website. *FirstStop* uses computer and telephone technology to link together the national partners to provide seamless information and advice about a range of housing, care, finance and rights-related issues.

FirstStop is also building capacity at the local level through funding, support, training and the sharing of technology with local information and advice providers, many of which can offer face to face services including support, advocacy and brokerage.

FirstStop's main funding during 2009-10 was from Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the Big Lottery Fund (BLF).

The evaluation

The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research is undertaking an independent evaluation of the *FirstStop* service. The evaluation, which started in November 2009, has included a literature and policy review; interviews with participating organisations and stakeholders; interviews with front line staff; a postal survey of 300 customers; telephone interviews with ten randomly sampled customers; review of the local partnership plans; analysis of the training programme; and an analysis of the data, actions and costs of the service. This is a report of initial and emerging findings. Phase 2 of the evaluation is scheduled to start in April 2010. It will explore the development of the local partnerships further and produce a detailed value for money assessment of the initiative. The evaluation is scheduled to continue until the end of March 2011.

Evaluation findings

How the national service is provided

The main set up costs of the *FirstStop* initiative were the technology and the local partnerships. Investment in the technology enables the web and telephone service to be provided and links local and national service providers. Nine local partnerships have been seed funded and three others provided with in-kind support. The partnerships are with a range of local information and advice services for older people across the country. They are linked to the national advice service and deliver face to face services in local areas.

Initial enquiries are dealt with by four front line staff who provide information and advice by telephone and email, send written information and keep a detailed record of all enquiries so that callers do not have to repeat the details of their situation if they call again or need advice from a specialist advisor. Complex enquiries are dealt with by the specialist partner agencies. The technology enables the front line staff to instantly transfer callers to specialists who are based in physically different offices. Most of the written information provided to customers, such as factsheets and guides on different topics, are provided by the partner organisations. They are stored electronically and are printed to order to post to customers, or are emailed. More than 70 different information and advice guides are available to cover the range of issues about which older people want information and advice.

The nature of the service means that there have been considerable set up costs. The costs of running the service are mainly related to staffing, communications and ensuring up to date information. Unit costs therefore decline rapidly as usage increases. The preliminary analysis shows that *FirstStop* was rapidly able to increase customer volumes and deliver the service at a lower unit cost. The research suggests that with continued funding the marginal cost of dealing with more customers is relatively low.

Increasing customer volumes during 2009

The data analysis showed that the average number of telephone and email enquiries and the average number of website visits increased over the year (Figure 1). During the weeks of 2009 for which data were available, the average number of customers per week was 1345.

The estimated annual number of customers for financial year 2009-10 is 73,200, exceeding the CLG target of 50,000. The estimated annual number of website downloads of housing related documents in 2009-10 is 13,315, exceeding the CLG target of 10,000.

The postal survey was sent to a random sample of 300 customers who had contacted *FirstStop* by telephone, email or letter over a six week period between September and November 2009. The survey found:

- Most customers, 76%, said it was very easy to get in touch with *FirstStop* and 75% said they felt they were given enough time to explain their query
- The majority, 82%, said the advisor had listened and understood what was wanted. Most, 76%, said the advisor was well informed.

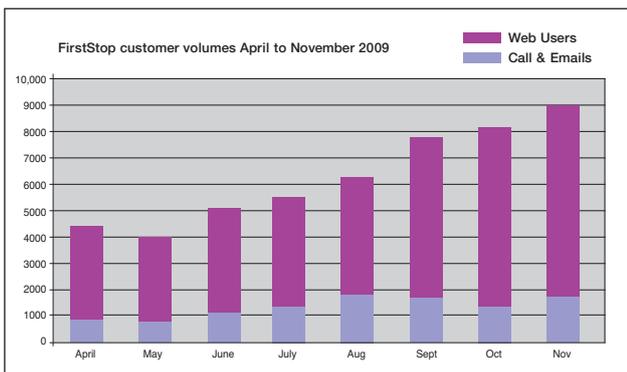


Figure 1: Average number of telephone calls, emails and web users April to November 2009.

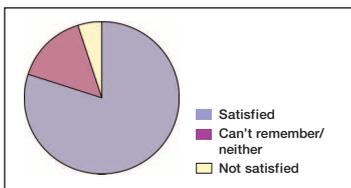


Figure 2: Customer satisfaction

A very high proportion, 90%, of those who were sent written information after their enquiry said the information was easy to understand. Most customers, 79%, said they would recommend *Firststop* to others. The few customers who reported being dissatisfied all appeared to be unhappy for reasons independent of the service provided by *FirstStop*, for example, they had been found ineligible for continuing care by their local health authority or PCT.

All customer enquiries are recorded in *FirstStop*'s database. Analysis of the data found that customers contacted *FirstStop* for information and advice about a broad range of issues, as shown in Figure 3. Many customers contacted *FirstStop* concerned that an elderly parent was struggling

to manage and needed to leave their home; many were unaware of the range of the alternative options available, such as home adaptations or care at home, that might enable their parent to remain in their own home.

Reason for contacting FirstStop	Proportion of customers
Sheltered housing	33%
Other issues	26%
Care funding	15%
Housing general	12%
Community care	4%
Care homes	3%
Housing and care	3%
Housing for dementia	2%
Extra care	2%

Figure 3: Reason for contacting *FirstStop*.

Developing local partnerships

FirstStop is developing partnerships with local authorities and agencies working in the field of housing and care advice and related services for older people. So far nine local information and advice services have been seed-funded by *FirstStop* with a further three receiving substantial in-kind support. Through these varied national-local partnerships *FirstStop* is testing different models of delivering joined-up services to local populations. It is investing particularly in building close working arrangements with the expanding network of Home Improvement Agencies and Handy person services. *FirstStop*'s national network of information and advice exemplar projects will enable service providers to share good practice.

CASE STUDY: *FirstStop* customer

Telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of *FirstStop* customers who responded to the postal survey. In one example, the interviewee contacted *FirstStop* on behalf of her mother and her aunt who shared a house. The interviewee was concerned about her mother's mobility and wished to move her to the ground floor of the house. Her mother died before this could take place and her aunt collapsed on the same day. Her aunt has since fallen and broken her hip and is currently in hospital. The interviewee is now trying to find a care home for her aunt. She contacted *FirstStop* for assistance and found the service invaluable:

"I knew nothing about what to do. FirstStop sent me leaflets which also have useful phone numbers on the back. I got information about care homes and about financial assessments. The financial side of things is a nightmare, the FirstStop leaflet lays out all the costings. I've called them twice and both times the information came really quickly. They made me aware of what roads were open to me. They really have time for you and didn't rush me and they listened and answered any point that needed to be expanded upon. They were just brilliant and I can't think of anything better."

Training to build local capacity

FirstStop is providing training to:

- Individuals whose work is primarily related to housing and advice for older people
- People who in a paid or voluntary capacity come into regular contact with older people
- Community activists and networkers

Training is delivered in partnership with Care & Repair England, and includes:

- Face to face group sessions
- Distribution of self-training packages
- Bespoke support to local exemplars, including induction into techniques for cascading learning to other agencies and community groups
- Awareness raising training for older people who are involved in their neighbourhoods and communities.

The feedback from 92 training participants showed that the majority, 98%, rated the training as excellent or good.

"When clients ask about housing options I will have the FirstStop website to fall back on to find out what the individual needs. I am now more aware of choices available. Thank you."

"With my new knowledge of housing advice for older people I will be able to help and advise and direct people to make their choices better."

"I already had thoughts about making decisions about my housing for later in life; doing it while I had the ability and energy. This has added weight and information to my decision making process."

Benefits of FirstStop

As part of the scoping exercise for Phase 1 of the evaluation, national partner organisations of FirstStop and stakeholders

CASE STUDY: Local partnership

The FirstStop local partnership in Somerset provides an example. It is expanding local housing options information and advice delivery, particularly through provision of one to one housing options advice. Somerset West will become a housing options resource for other Somerset Home Improvement Agencies and similar local services and professionals who work with older people. It will broaden the knowledge base about older people's housing options available in Somerset and is working with FirstStop national to help compile an online directory of local home support services. It is developing an adapted/accessible housing needs register, initially to pilot in Somerset West and then to develop across the county. The service is working with the County and District Authorities to develop a strategic approach to the provision of housing related advice and information across the County. The local partnership is also contributing to the delivery of the FirstStop national service through local promotion of its availability.

were interviewed. They felt that the service was needed as it has been very unclear where older people can access the information and advice they need. As the literature review established, many information and advice services for older people have been patchy and short-lived.

The national partners described how a key benefit of FirstStop is providing information and advice through a 'one stop shop', to prevent older people having to telephone many different organisations to find the information they need. The partners believe that FirstStop makes a positive difference to older people, their families or carers by providing the right information at the right time and therefore improves outcomes for older people.

"The main benefit has to be that more older people (and their family, friends, carers) get timely access to the information and advice that they need at a point when they are considering their future housing situation and so informed decisions are taken, rather than older people simply finding themselves in a crisis and out of control of their living situation".
(FirstStop national partner)

Financial savings generated by FirstStop

While it is too early to quantify outcomes, there is evidence that FirstStop can contribute to financial savings for individuals and public budgets, for example, through reducing expenditure on care homes. Health sector savings may be achieved, for example, through housing improvements and fall prevention and through improving older people's mental health, as they feel empowered and maintain their independence.

"If people stay put because of the advice they get and their homes are safer or warmer, if heating is put in, then it improves life expectancy and reduces care costs and hospital admission costs. When people do want to move, it frees up under-occupied housing for larger households. The main benefit is wellbeing and control over their lives and they can stay where they want to be." (FirstStop national partner)

Conclusion

The FirstStop service was clearly increasingly successful through 2009; customer volumes are growing and have exceeded targets. FirstStop appears to be delivering a much-needed service in an efficient and cost-effective way. There is the capacity to expand customer volumes and reduce unit costs as long as core funding is maintained. FirstStop is an ambitious initiative and has the potential to grow and deliver a broad range of goals and savings.

The technology also has the potential to bring savings. Whilst the organisations are physically in different places, the customer only has to call one telephone number and is transferred seamlessly to the appropriate service provider. This system is cheaper and more efficient for both the enquirer and the organisations involved.