

FirstStop Evaluation Summary

FirstStop Advice is an independent, free service offering advice and information for older people, their families and carers about housing and care options in later life, funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Big Lottery Fund. It is led by the charity Elderly Accommodation Counsel (EAC) working in partnership with other national and local organisations. FirstStop delivers information and advice through a national telephone helpline and website.

FirstStop has also seed-funded a number of local information and advice services. These local projects aim to raise the profile of housing options for older people in their area and to provide a face to face case work service to older people. The case work is a mixture of information and advice provision and more intense case work to assist older people in resolving their housing and care problems.

A training programme about housing options for older people was delivered by FirstStop through Care & Repair England through face to face training, shorter workshops, a cascade model of training, supporting local exemplar projects to deliver workshops, training locally and production of a set of web-based self training materials.

The interface between the national and local services is one of the unique features of the FirstStop initiative. In addition to the model of referral between national and local service and vice versa as appropriate to individual client needs, the national/local interface also works by providing information and advice resources at the national level to local housing options case workers.

The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research at the University of Cambridge undertook an independent evaluation of the FirstStop service between November 2009 and June 2011.

Successes

- Use of the national service has grown steadily and the success at meeting funder targets shows that there is demand for the service. Measures of usage of the website have well exceeded the targets set.
- Targets relating to the eventual outcomes of individual cases are harder to measure, and the evaluation team drew on analysis of the follow-up survey of a sample of clients. This supports the view that advice supplied by FirstStop is effective in supporting housing transitions, including downsizing, for a number of older people which equals or exceeds the specified targets. For example, analysis of the CRM and postal survey data gives an estimate of 1,788 clients from the national service who actually downsized, a great success against a target of 750.
- FirstStop has succeeded in bringing together the national and local agencies to develop a 'seamless' service. It has been successful in developing a network model of service provision with links not just between the national telephone helpline and local projects but also with a range of specialist national agencies e.g. financial advice services. This enables service users to be referred to appropriate agencies seamlessly. The ongoing development of a Customer Relations Management system

- (CRM) enables client information to be recorded and to be accessed by FirstStop advisors when clients contact the service again.
- One benefit of the national/local FirstStop model is the way in which the local case workers are able to use the national FirstStop resources in their local work. Many clients have complex needs and information is required on a range of issues from housing, to care, to benefits and finance. Being able to draw on up to date and detailed information from the national FirstStop service was very useful to the local case workers. This bank of information would be very difficult and expensive to replicate in local areas.
- Success of the local projects is evidenced in how they have met their targets for delivering face to face support to older people and there is a clear demand for the services.
- The service is meeting broader aims of empowering older people to make informed decisions, giving them full knowledge of all the options available and supporting them in appraising the options effectively.
- There is lots of evidence of positive client outcomes, whether the older person was supported to move or supported to stay in their current home.
- The research identified a number of benefits to the individuals who used the services: feeling more confident in making decisions, feeling more informed and more able to choose between different options; particularly through the local projects, clients were supported to stay in or move to the accommodation of their choice, empowering them to live in the housing that they felt suited them best and giving them wider choices; prevention of housing related health problems e.g. falls and unplanned and unwanted moves into care homes; some clients were financially better off through receiving financial advice and/or benefits checks; reduced anxiety; improved well being and quality of life.
- The projects often worked successfully across different agencies and departments to resolve client issues. It is very difficult for an older person to know which department or agency to contact for different issues and the case workers were able to do this on their behalf.
- An additional benefit of the projects was the way in which the case worker freed up social worker and occupational therapist (OT) time. Many of the particularly vulnerable clients had been on the books of social workers and/or OTs for some time but their issues did not easily fall under the remit of these departments, nor did they have time to provide the sort of support needed. The local project case workers were able to take over the cases and provide the time and support needed to resolve the issues.
- The local projects also led to greater awareness of housing options for older people. The strategic work encouraged more joined-up working between organisations and professionals.
- The training programme received very positive feedback. It provided training about housing and care options for older people to both service providers and older people and raised the profile of the FirstStop service.

- In terms of value for money the research identified a number of benefits and potential savings to the public purse. The savings to the public purse may be realised over a number of years, for example, where someone is assisted to remain living independently in their own home rather than making a premature move to a residential home.
- Many of the vulnerable older people using the case work services had a history of recurrent falls as a result of living in inappropriate accommodation. The cost of a serious fall with necessary follow up care is around £30 000. Preventing falls by adapting homes or assisting people to move to more suitable accommodation has potentially very significant savings.
- Analysis of the case study local projects showed that despite the limited time involved so far, there have already been savings generated to the public purse. For example, analysis of the Somerset West local project suggested that once the costs of providing the service were taken into account it generated additional savings to the public purse of more than £45 000 over a one year period.

Challenges

- Despite rising usage of the website and telephone service, the FirstStop brand is not yet well known and is operating in a field where there are well known brands such as Age UK. Going forward it will be important to improve the branding and public awareness of the service.
- The initiative has struggled to meet certain targets such as the number of people assisted to release equity from their homes. This is likely to be in part the result of the current state of the housing market but also because such decisions often take a long time to be realised.
- Unit costs of the national information and advice service are slightly higher than anticipated and FirstStop will need to reduce them quickly as the service develops.
- A significant challenge has been in developing the national/local interface of the service. Some of the local projects took much longer than expected to establish, mainly as a result of administrative and bureaucratic challenges in host agencies. They required more management than was expected.
- A particular issue with the development of the national/local service model was that it did not generate the expected level of referrals between the local and national services.
- Case workers described the need for 'marketing' skills as a challenge. Whilst they were all experienced housing options case workers, few had any experience of promoting a service or brand. It required continuous promotion to get the FirstStop brand recognised locally, but case workers had to balance this against their capacity to deliver face to face case work; so they tended to step back from promotion when case numbers increased for fear of too much demand.
- Achieving the strategic aims was challenging in some areas, even where the case work service was successful. This was partly due to local political sensibilities. One challenge faced by the pilots was that it seems to take a long time to encourage other professionals to use and access new information and advice resources.

- Monitoring and data collection were issues for many of the projects. There was a need to evidence success of the case work but the relatively short time frame of the projects reduces the chance of hard 'outcomes', for example, it can take many months to support someone to move home.

The future

- The future of the FirstStop service will be a combination of national and local provision.
- FirstStop will remain a service that is free of direct charge through the national telephone helpline and website.
- New modes of interaction with the service will continue to be developed, such as the provision of information through the 'live chat' function on the website.
- There will be a focus on increasing the number of clients and reducing unit costs.
- A cross-subsidy model of provision will be developed where those who can afford it pay for certain specialised support services which will help to fund the telephone and web service. It is expected that services will be commissioned by stakeholders such as local authorities and PCTs.
- The local partnerships will be developed in a range of different models linking national and local information and advice provision, and face to face housing options case work.
- Older people are facing many challenges. In this context the provision of up to date, accurate, individual information and advice about housing, care, financial and rights issues will be crucial in supporting older people to make well informed decisions.

For more information

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Further publications from the evaluation can be found at:
<http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk>



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