

Active Individuals

A draft policy paper on using information, advice, guidance to help people help themselves

1. Background

We want people to have the best chance at living an active, healthy and independent life. Everyone can take steps to cut the chances that they will need to rely on public sector support in future by making healthy lifestyle choices from an early age, keeping active and planning for the future.

We have a role in making sure people can access clear, up-to-date, information, advice and guidance that will help them to make good choices that help them and their families to help themselves, reducing their reliance on the state for support. Recent legislation introduced through the Care Act (2014) and the Children and Families Act (2013) will require us to ensure that information and advice and, where necessary advocacy, are available to the community more consistently in order to promote more independence, increase resilience and reduce growing demand for public services. We want to make sure that people are signposted to the full range of help, solutions and support available to them.

We know that it can be difficult for people to navigate the range of public and voluntary sector services available to them. It can be confusing to know who does what and when people contact us, sometimes with relatively simple requests, they can get drawn into complicated referral and assessment processes that do little to deliver what they want or need.

We believe in prevention and that early intervention works. We think we sometimes miss opportunities for this sort of response, either because we fail to spot early signs that someone's needs are growing, or because that person is not aware of the help available to them in the community. Better signposting and clearer information will mean fewer missed opportunities for prevention.

We want people to be able to contact us when they need to, either because they want to report a problem or have a question about a service we provide. We want people to be able to get the right response and at a time that is convenient to them.

We've looked at how people get in contact with us – and this is something we can improve. We are not making it easy enough for people to access information and services online and we haven't started to exploit the full potential for people to access us by smart-phone or tablet. As a result, people are forced to contact us in other ways (including by telephone or face-to-face contact) that are less convenient for them, more time-consuming and ultimately more expensive. More importantly,

this makes it harder for those who really do need telephone or face-to-face contact to get through. We believe we can avoid wasted effort and expense for our customers and ourselves and improve our customers' experience.

Finally, while we think that signposting to information and advice is vital in supporting active individuals, it doesn't have to be the Council that provides that advice. Modern technology makes it easier for us to work flexibly to share buildings and information. We recognise that it doesn't matter whose brand appears above the door or on the website, so long as people can access the services they need.

This opens up opportunities to work differently within communities. We think we can make better use of the facilities that already exist within communities to make sure there is a 'front door' for those who need to contact us or our partners in person, and an opportunity to share these spaces with partners and community groups helping to support individuals to achieve their outcomes

As part of our 'Together We Can' consultation, in summer 2014 we set out some of our ideas and invited people to share their views with us. These initial findings helped us shape the draft Policy which we took to Cabinet in October 2014. Following this, we undertook a further phase

of consultation and engagement to continue to involve customers, residents, local communities and our partners in shaping our ideas and their implementation.

2. What you have told us

The 'Together We Can' consultation told us that there is strong support for our aim to make it easier for people to make choices that help them to stay active and independent and that we need to make it easier for them to access information, advice and services.

85% of respondents agreed that council services and information should be available online around the clock wherever possible. The detailed feedback confirmed to us that people need a range of options when they need support or advice – sometimes people would prefer to use the internet or a smartphone, but not everyone has access to that technology, and sometimes people need face-to-face contact.

This picture builds on wider feedback we have received from customers that tells us they are dissatisfied with current arrangements for contacting us that often require them to pay for postage or telephone calls or restrict them to contacting us during office hours.

When asked whether the Council should consolidate its buildings and land in order to free up money for frontline services there was similarly strong support. While 82% of respondents agreed with this approach, many also commented on the potential of buildings to act as a community resource or to generate income, so encouraged us to think broadly about all the options in order to get the best value.

Overall, your feedback recognised the potential for people to help themselves more, and the part that good information and advice can play in supporting them. It also confirmed the appetite for a more joined up approach and the need for the Council to get better at signposting to other sources of support as well as increasing the ways that our customers can contact us when they need to.

The second phase of consultation was undertaken to further shape the ideas developed in the draft Policy, and help inform the development and implementation of the proposals. In relation to the Active Individuals Policy, focus groups were held with Residents in Stroud and Tewkesbury, and with Community Groups in Gloucester.

The feedback received from these focus groups was generally positive, but there were areas that drew particular attention from the focus groups, around some of the wording of the Policy and also how we propose to put the Policy into action.

It was recognised that the Policy is seeking to support a culture shift towards self-reliance for individuals, and that there will be differences between generations in the way that they adapt to this. The focus groups felt that education from an early age was key to helping people be active and healthy individuals, and to make informed decisions about life choices.

In relation to the planned increase of availability of digital information and services, the focus groups remained positive about this, and offered helpful suggestions for improvements to the Council's website – such as an easy to use search facility. They reflected in the same way that respondents to our first phase of consultation did that

there were some groups of society, and some services, that digital would not be appropriate for and advocated the maintaining of other channels for those who need them – and this is a key element of the Policy.

There was also feedback in relation to the use of council buildings by community groups, and the support that volunteers may need to become more active in their communities and help others to become more self-reliant.

In relation to the feedback received regarding 'how' we intend to implement this Policy, there is a range of existing and planned activity within the Council, and with partners, to take the Policy forward. This has been captured in an Action Plan which can be found in the Appendix to this Policy.

The feedback from the consultation has been considered, and used to inform the re-drafting of this Policy for Cabinet approval.

3. Examples of how we are already making it better for customers

We have been working towards a more consistent approach to customer access for some time. This policy builds on good practice we have already developed but broadens it into a more strategic approach.

The following are some of the areas where we are already making progress.

Helping people make healthy lifestyle choices – Through our public health team, we are supporting people to make the sort of choices that will improve their health and wellbeing and reduce the chances that they will need our support. For example, by using a pop-up shop in the centre of Gloucester to help people to stop smoking.

‘Active Together’ grants – Through county councillors, we are providing grants that will increase the number of people engaging in physical activity at a local level.

Making the Council website more user-friendly - We have already streamlined the Council’s website, reducing clutter by focussing on the most frequent questions that our customers ask, making it easier to navigate and introducing self-service for some transactions.

Consolidating Council offices – We have already reduced the number of separate council offices by bringing different back-office teams into more flexible, shared accommodation with other departments, or by sharing premises with other partners. We use the proceeds to pay off debt, reducing the cost of repayments and freeing up money for front-line services.

Introducing a common, Council-wide approach to dealing with compliments, comments and complaints so that customers get a consistent experience and that problems get dealt with at the appropriate level in the appropriate way.

Making the best use of libraries to promote access to information, advice guidance and council services, to provide internet access points and other community services and activities.

Moving Council staff and services into community or partner-owned buildings, such as is already happening in Bourton-on-the-Water or at Tewkesbury Borough Council’s offices.

Clearly, both the opportunity and the appetite exist to take this much further and to develop a comprehensive approach to customer access.

Further detail on the actions which are currently underway, and are planned to be taken, can be found in the Appendix to this Policy.

4. How can we take this further forward?

The overall aim of this draft policy is to ensure that:

- Individuals and families can make informed choices that will improve their lives without over-reliance on the state
- People can easily find out about advice and support available to them within their communities
- When people need to contact the Council, they get a timely and accurate response in the most appropriate and straightforward way.

We will work with partners and communities to develop an approach based on the following principles:

- Individual responsibility – Individuals should take as much responsibility for their own choices and outcomes as they can.
- Self service – Wherever possible, people should be encouraged to help themselves with well targeted information and appropriate support.
- Prevention wherever possible – It is worth taking preventative action in order to avoid their needs escalating.
- Digital by default – Customers should be able to access an increasing range of information, advice and services online.
- Digital assistance – Providing training, support and access are some of the ways of helping people to help themselves by increasing their confidence and ability to access information and services digitally.
- Face to face access when it is really needed – Understanding that digital isn't available to everyone or suitable for every circumstance, we will work with communities and partners to provide face-to-face contact to those who need it, recognising that there won't be a 'one size fits all approach'.
- Joined up access – Customers should not have to worry about finding the right organisation or department. Information and advice should be clearly signposted, high quality, easy to access, consistent and as joined up as possible regardless of who provides it.
- Right first time – Customers will get a clear, accurate, timely and consistent response from well-trained and knowledgeable staff, reducing the need for repeat contact and avoiding un-necessary referrals to specialist professional services

Informed by these principles, we will deliver an ambitious programme that will include the following activities:

We will make sure our front facing customer service staff play a joined up role – signposting people towards help in their communities wherever possible.

We will extend the range of services that are available for self-service through the Council's website on PCs, smart-phones and tablets – recognising that this increasing use of technology and internet based services also needs to be supported by a level of face-to-face contact.

We will work with partners to review the range of information, advice and guidance already available, working on the principle of making best use of what is already there.

We will make better use of buildings, whether owned by the Council, partners or communities to provide face to face contact for those that need it.

Where, as a result of our review, buildings are no longer needed, we will consider a range of options, including the potential community use, income generation (for example renting), selling to pay back debt and to reinvest funds in front-line services.

We will make more use of social media to allow customers to communicate with us, to engage with the public quickly, to share key messages and to respond to feedback.

We will use data and information appropriately to understand our customers, inform decision making and improve our services.

In order to provide more joined-up, flexible and locally responsive services, we will make full use of technology to allow our staff and partners to work across a number of locations.

We will improve our website, making sure that it is user-friendly, kept up-to-date, and can be easily searched to find information and services.

Please note that the Principles set out at the beginning of Section 4 have been 'grouped' and used to shape the Action Plan accompanying this Policy.

5. What will this mean in practice

The changes we want to bring about over the next few years should result in noticeable changes.

Where you can, we will encourage you to find ways of helping yourself and increasing your own independence, and achieving your outcomes.

When you need advice, help or support, you will be less likely to find yourself in a formal referral and assessment process and more likely to be signposted to help within your community.

It will be easier to find current, relevant, accurate information and advice online and in other forms, provided by people you can trust.

You will be able to do more on the Council's website and through smart-phone applications, including searching and applying for services, reporting a problem or raising a request. This will be quick and easy at any time of the day or night.

When you do need to phone the Council, we will connect or signpost you to someone who can deal with your concern or issue, either within the Council or the wider community network.

When you need face to face contact, you will be able to speak to someone who is knowledgeable about Council services working from a recognisable and accessible multi-agency contact point, even if the building does not carry a County Council brand. In many cases, this will be operated within the community by the community.

It will matter less which agency is responsible for which service – partners will respond to your problem or concern in a more joined up way.

You will be able to provide quick and easy feedback about Council services through social media and your feedback will be used to make changes and improvements.

Annex – Some definitions

When we say	We mean
Contact channels	The different ways that customers contact the Council, for example, letter, telephone, email, web-form, social media, face-to-face
Customer	Any user (or potential user) of services, whether voluntary or public sector, formal or informal. This includes all residents, visitors, businesses, service users, etc
Signposting	The role the Council or another partner plays in helping customers to find out about services, support or information available to them.