

Summary of the FirstStop Evaluation Findings November 2012

FirstStop is an independent, free service offering advice and information to older people, their families and carers about housing and care options in later life. It is led by the charity Elderly Accommodation Counsel (EAC) in partnership with other national and local organisations and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). 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 which 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 Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research is evaluating the FirstStop service. This summary reflects on the achievements of the service between 1st April 2011 and end of March 2012.

Helping more older people

The evaluation found that national and local usage of the service is increasing. Over 170,000 people used the national FirstStop service in 2011/12, well above the target. Just over 150,000 accessed information through the FirstStop website, while more than 18,000 customers received personal housing related advice from a FirstStop advisor through the national telephone advice line.

Almost 11,000 people received advice and support specifically about downsizing through provision of bespoke housing options reports, face-to-face support from local partners or referral to partners under the FirstStop Moving Home service. The other main topics on which advice was given included housing options, finance and care.

Local partner housing options services

In 2011/12 FirstStop part funded advisors and caseworkers in 20 different organisations. There were approximately 100 advisors and caseworkers providing housing options advice to older people on a full or part time basis within these organisations. In total over 2130 customers received face to face advice and more in depth support through longer term casework over the year, of which 1900 were supported by a local partner and 230 were provided by older people giving peer-to-peer information and advice.

Improving older people's quality of life and delivering savings to public finances

The evaluation explored the progress of four of the local housing options services which are partially funded by FirstStop. It analysed their activities and success and estimated the potential savings to the public purse of their housing options case work.

As a result of the FirstStop funding and support the partners were able to increase their capacity, to help people with housing issues in more depth, and to do more general awareness raising around housing options for older people. In addition to funding FirstStop provided the case workers with valuable resources through the website, national advice line and the support from the buddy system:

“Lots of customers have more than one problem, not just housing, and they are inter-connected. It is better to deal with them all rather than refer them to separate advisors. The FirstStop funding means we can see more customers and were able to increase our capacity”. (FirstStop local partner case worker)

The evaluation looked at client cases from the local partner case studies to explore how the case work intervention might have saved money for the public purse, for example, by reducing expenditure by the local authority or health service. Housing options advice and support may assist older people to make better decisions and to avert housing or health crises which cannot only be detrimental to an individual's quality of life, but also very costly to public services. For example, if an older person who is struggling to cope at home is assisted to acquire home adaptations, this can enable them to continue living independently and avert the need to move to expensive residential care.

The four local partners gave examples of types of housing options support which could generate potential savings to the public purse and improve the income and quality of life of older people. They provided advice and support to older people about their housing options and one local partner focused in particular on maximising income by indentifying unclaimed benefits. Analysis of a sample of ten of one local partner's case study clients showed that there was an **approximate average saving to the public purse of £3014 per person** for each of the sample cases. The service assisted some people to remain in their own home with adaptations or home care and/or improved income, whilst for others the most appropriate support was to move to sheltered housing or to downsize. Through these interventions a number of possible detrimental and costly outcomes for individual older people were averted. These included avoiding court action for debt, homelessness, GP visits or hospital admission as a result of health issues caused by unsuitable housing, and preventing the need to move to residential care, all of which can have significant costs to local authorities and national government. Analysis of cases from the local partner organisation which focuses on income maximisation found that the benefits to individual clients were an average of **£2050 per person** per annum in additional income. This could fund significant improvements to an individual's quality of life and also benefit the wider local economy:

"I've brought in £3/4 of a million in extra benefits, so if those people live for 10 years which is not unrealistic for someone who is 65 or 70 then an extra £7 million will circulate in the local community and economy. It is spent on gardeners, taxis etc, on all the things which make a person independent. So it benefits both individuals and the wider community". (FirstStop local partner case worker)

Costs of the service are decreasing

Unit costs of the national advice service have declined since 2010/11 as variable costs were reduced and the number of clients was higher. The overall unit cost was £15.29 in 2011/2012, a reduction of 25% from the previous year while the website cost 14p per person to provide in 2011/12, which is a reduction of 22%.

Training

FirstStop reported to DCLG in 2011/12 that 1,572 people have received housing options training. 580 professionals were trained using traditional face to face methods, 265 people attended housing options workshops and 727 people viewed the self- training materials.

Case Study – supported to remain in own home

Mrs B was 75 years old and lived alone in her own first floor flat. Although she loved her home she was having difficulties with her mobility especially on the stairs. She had been advised that she would have to move to sheltered housing. The FirstStop caseworker visited Mrs B at home to discuss her options. Knowing that she preferred to remain in her own home, the caseworker organised the fitting of equipment which aids her daily living, including grab and stair rails and a bath seat. The caseworker also identified that Mrs B may qualify for Attendance Allowance and made the application on her behalf. Through the support provided by the housing options caseworker, Mrs B was able to remain living in her home where she is happier and can pay for extra help at home when she needs it through the increased income she now receives.

Case Study – supported to leave nursing home to live independently

Mrs C was a wheelchair user living with family with a carer visiting three times a day. After problems with her family Mrs C was made homeless and was accommodated by the local authority in a nursing home. However, the FirstStop housing options caseworker was able to help her to move into a ground floor local authority flat and arrange carers to visit her in her new home. The support from the caseworker meant that Mrs C could leave the nursing home and live independently. This saved the local authority the greater cost of nursing home accommodation, and helped the lady to move to a property where she feels safe and happy.

Contacts

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