

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

Background

FirstStop Advice 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) working in partnership with other national and local organisations.

The evaluation is being conducted by the Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) at the University of Cambridge.

In 2009 CCHPR began an evaluation, funded by DCLG, of the FirstStop service. The aims and objectives being:

1. To assess value for money, in terms of costs, benefits and savings to the public purse.
2. To evaluate the service in terms of how far it is meeting its objectives of:
 - a. Empowering older people to make informed decisions
 - b. Give them full knowledge of all the options available
 - c. Support them in appraising these options effectively
3. To deliver the objectives of the funders and other stakeholders.

The initial findings were published in March 2010. A copy of which can be obtained from Dr Gemma Burgess or directly from FirstStop by calling 020 7820 1773. CCHPR continued with Phase 2 of the evaluation in 2010 through until July 2011. This document provides a summary overview of that phase. For the full reports please visit: <http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/>.

Key findings

- Demand for the national service has continued to grow as funder targets are met. Measures of usage of the website show that over 90,000 people visited it in 2010/11.
- The local advice and information services seed funded by FirstStop have evidenced success by meeting their targets for delivering face to face support to older people – demonstrating demand
- These local projects have also demonstrated how their involvement has generated savings to the public purse. For example, analysis of the Somerset West local project suggests that once the cost of providing the service was taken into account it generated savings to the public purse of more than £45,000 over a one year period.
- Another benefit of the national/local 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.
- 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.
- Analysis of the follow-up survey of a sample of clients supports the view that advice supplied by FirstStop is effective in supporting housing transitions, including down-sizing. 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.

The need for information and advice

Recent policy and practice has focused on how best to prevent older people from living in unsuitable housing which does not meet their needs and how to prevent older people making unwanted moves into residential care, particularly at times of crisis, which 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 and coping with changing housing and care needs. It has also been recognised that older people face problems that cut across housing, health, finance, care and their general rights.

"Improved choice and convenience to consumers when faced with a decision about their care home arrangements - for example, the provision of information to consumers (including example contracts and inspection results) has improved and has been made more accessible through the development of one-stop information sources such as the FirstStop Care Advice service." Evaluating the impact of the OFT 2005 study into care homes for older people, Office of Fair Trading

"The government is committed to enabling people to make an informed choice about their housing and care in later life. That is why we are investing £1.5 million in the FirstStop information and advice service." Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England, Department of Communities and Local Government

What is FirstStop?

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. It is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and had additional funding from the Big Lottery Fund until December 2010. 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 began as a pilot service in August 2008 and was funded by DCLG to go national in 2009.

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 is 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. FirstStop has an in-house training manager to deliver training to professionals within the sector.

The evaluation methodology

Phase 2 of the evaluation involved an update of the literature and policy review; interviews with national stakeholders; interviews with FirstStop staff; analysis of FirstStop's client data; two postal surveys of FirstStop customers; follow up interviews with customers who responded to the surveys; an evaluation of the training programme; interviews with local exemplar project managers; five local exemplar project case studies which included interviews with case workers; analysis of detailed client information from the local exemplar project case studies and a value for money analysis of the local and national services. The five local project case studies were Oxfordshire; Somerset West; Nottinghamshire; Newcastle and Warwickshire.

Evaluation findings

Customer satisfaction.

The evaluation surveyed users of the national service and found that general measures of satisfaction about the service were achieved for nearly all respondents: most said that they were happy with the quality and means of information provision and would recommend the service to others; 100% said that the telephone operator was polite and friendly and 98% said they felt listened to and that the advisor understood what assistance they needed.

Empowering older people.

Amongst survey respondents there was a very considerable proportion of clients – perhaps around half – for whom the service was more immediately important in that: it helped solve their specific problem (55%), provided help they couldn't have got elsewhere (48%) or without which they wouldn't have known what to do next (41%).

The client interviews showed the complexity of issues people were dealing with. Most people did not just have a housing or a care related problem, but issues that were related to housing, care, finance and other issues such as health. One common issue raised was the difficulty of knowing where to get information and advice and the distress and anxiety this had caused before contacting FirstStop. Many of the interviewees described how helpful and knowledgeable the FirstStop advisors had been. Many people who had used the service had increased confidence, were more able to appraise their options and to make informed decisions.

Mrs C wrote to say "On behalf of my husband and myself I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your quick and professional response in assessing him and enabling him with his disability to maintain his independence. He has received a bath lift, male urinal, toilet frame and bed support. These pieces of equipment will help enhance his quality of life and independence. Without your assistance we would have had to endeavour to struggle on regardless. Many thanks to you for chasing up the occupational therapist referral and keeping us informed as to what was happening. We felt it is the least we could do to contact you and let you know how your service has helped us both".

Broadening awareness.

Through the strategic development work the local pilots have raised the profile of FirstStop amongst sector professionals and older people, making them aware of the telephone helpline and the resources available on the website. The pilots have encouraged greater use of both.

"[The consultant's] work had a massive impact on the strategy side with the local authority. It raised awareness that things need to change and that information and advice is necessary. There had already been a lot of work on information in Newcastle but the project emphasised need. I expect that more will use the web and phone as there is nothing else like it. It is a good central hub for people. More services are using it. Things are changing and they have to change with it. People need tailored advice around housing. Newcastle tended to target youngerr people for housing issues but never tailored it to older people. FirstStop is a way of delivering that and filling the gap".
(Interview with case worker)

Developing local partnerships

The national advice line and website provides information and advice to people who need some support to make good decisions. The local projects provide in depth face to face support to particularly vulnerable people who need more assistance to resolve their housing, care and financial problems. At the time of writing the number of local partners had increased to 19 with more still to sign up to be part of the FirstStop service.

Benefits to individuals of the FirstStop service

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.

Savings to the public purse generated by the FirstStop service

There are also savings to the public purse generated by the local services:

- Prevention of falls generates potentially considerable savings. Many of the vulnerable older people using the case work services had a history of recurrent falls as a result of 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.

- Freeing up social worker and occupational therapist time generates financial savings. Many of the older people with complex needs did not fall easily within the remit of social workers and OTs but had been on their books for a long time with no resolution to their problems.
- Prevention of hospital admissions also has potentially very significant savings. Many of the vulnerable older people using the intense face to face case work services had a history of repeat hospital admissions as a result of living in unsuitable housing, with the knock on effects on their health, anxiety levels and well being. Being assisted to adapt their current home or to move to more suitable housing has potentially significant financial savings through preventing hospital admissions.
- Preventing premature moves to care homes can save large amounts of public funds. Some of the older people using the services were already close to crisis points and social workers would have had little option but to recommend residential care which is very expensive. But the assistance the local FirstStop case workers were able to offer enabled clients to either remain at home or to move to sheltered accommodation, which costs the public purse far less.
- In some cases people were supported to downsize, freeing up larger family sized housing in areas where there is a shortage of family housing. Similarly, some social rented properties were brought back into circulation as people moved into sheltered accommodation or into care homes, freeing up properties for people on waiting lists.

FirstStop Somerset West Care and Repair value for money case study

FirstStop has seed-funded a number of local information and advice services. Somerset Housing Options for Older People is a county wide project which provides training and information about the housing options for older people in the county of Somerset to health, housing and care professionals, older people and community activists. The project also has a casework service which provides information and practical assistance to older people and their relatives' carers who are thinking about their housing options, primarily operating in the West Somerset, Sedgemoor and Taunton Deane area, but offering advice and support to caseworkers in other parts of the county.

The project sits within Somerset West Care and Repair which is a Home Improvement Agency which covers two districts Sedgemoor and West Somerset. Customers of the housing project also have access to all other services provided by the HIA including handy-person services and energy efficiency advice either directly from Somerset West Care and Repair or by referral to a partner agency Mendip Care and Repair. This service helps older people who are thinking about their housing options as they are struggling to manage

at home, many of whom are particularly vulnerable through illness and disability. The project has a caseworker within a Home Improvement Agency with cases referred from social workers /OTs which are too complex, difficult and time consuming and/or fall outside their clear remit. The case worker provides information, advice and hands on support to help older people to make appropriate changes, such as to move or have home adaptations.

The evaluation analysed the value for money to the public purse of the service. Value for money is always based on a combination of research evidence and assumptions based on that evidence. Readers should refer to the Source Document (published mid January 2012) for more detailed information about the analysis.

The assessment is based on the evidence from the clients who were provided with a lot of support and who had a known outcome within the evaluation period. The outcomes for each client were identified and where possible ascribed a monetary value. The alternative outcomes which were likely to have occurred without the case work intervention were then costed for comparison. The difference between the two represents a saving/cost to the public purse. The cost of providing this part of the service is then deducted to give an

CLIENT CASE STUDY

The following case study is an example of how the services have been able to assist people to move to more suitable accommodation, giving them a better quality of life:

Mr B lived in a first floor bedsit in a sheltered complex in a large village in Rushcliffe. The complex is owned by an RSL. Mr B has significant health problems – he is very overweight, an insulin-dependent diabetic, and has arthritis and gout which affects his mobility. He has a history of falls. He was too worried about falling to leave his flat alone unless he is on his scooter. He was unable to use the shower in the property as it is over the bath. His OT has recommended an adaptation, but the property was not suitable. He was at that point relying on a strip wash.

He had lost a lot of confidence and independence over the few months before the Housing Choices Advisors intervention. Although he had asked the scheme manager about alternative flats, he had not been successful, and he did not know what to do next.

As a result of the Housing Choices Advisor's intervention, calls were made to the scheme manager and the RSL, and the outcome is that Mr B was found a one bedroom bungalow which is part of the same scheme, but which has a level access shower. Advice was also given on removal companies and support was given after his move to help him to settle in and resolve teething troubles.

Mr B has been able to move within the sheltered scheme that he knows and values, to a bungalow which suits his needs. He can shower independently and can store his scooter in his property so he can get out and about alone. Mr B feels less cramped in his new property and is less at risk of falls because of his new equipment, and the proximity of his scooter”.

(Case note write up by case worker)

estimated saving/cost to the public purse of this part of the service. The main outcomes were that clients moved to sheltered housing – in some cases preventing falls, hospital admissions, saving occupational therapist and social worker's time and reducing care at home needs. The annual saving to public purse once the cost of the service has been deducted was £44 076.

Training

The training programme aimed to deliver face to face training for over 1,000 people and to produce and promote online self training materials. The target was exceeded. It provided training about housing options for older people to both service providers and older people and raised the profile of the FirstStop service. Care & Repair ran full time courses focused on professional and volunteer advisors and half day workshops which were primarily aimed at older people, activists and volunteers. Feedback from the participants was very positive.

The Future

Researchers from the Centre for Housing and Planning Research, at the University of Cambridge, argue that resources of this type will become increasingly important as Britain's older population grows.

Dr Gemma Burgess, who led the research, said: “Most people want to stay in their own home as they age, but often through lack of support or preparation become unable to do so. This can mean older people move into residential homes, which is not only a move they do not want to make, but also one that is hugely costly to the taxpayer.”

“With better information and advice about how to deal with the housing, care and financial challenges of ageing from a service like FirstStop, people are able to remain independent in their own homes or move to housing that really suits them, not only saving the taxpayer money but, more importantly, improving the quality of life for older people.”

The report concludes that the FirstStop national information and advice service for older people is key to instilling a culture of preparation, prevention and self-help across the UK to spare many people the worst costs of old age. It can also give people a clear and accessible means of getting support when they do hit a crisis

Challenges for the FirstStop service are now to achieve significant growth in the volume of calls to the advice line, in the number of visits to the website, and in the volume of face to face clients using the local services. There will also be a focus on reducing the cost per case. The increase in partners presents challenges around how best to collect appropriate information on client outcomes which can be used to monitor the service. Phase 3 of the evaluation will focus on analysing the benefits and value for money of the national and local service.



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