

Notes from SIWG More for York Equality Impact Assessments meeting

12 October 2009, Mansion House

About the meeting

The meeting was chaired by Councillor Nigel Ayre and attended by Councillor Sonja Crisp, York Older People's Assembly (YOPA) (Age), York Racial Equality Network (YREN) (Race), York Valuing People Partnership (Learning Disabilities), York ACCESS group (physical/sensory disabilities), York Humanists and York Interfaith Forum (Religion and Belief).

Officers made a presentation about More for York and explained the approach to EIAs for the project. Below is a summary of what they said:

- More for York is a three-year programme of change. Currently the council is only looking at "year 0" which covers the period between now and March 2010.
- Council needs to examine everything it does and the way in which it does it, so that in future it spends less without affecting the quality of services delivered.
- Before making any changes to the way council services work, officers are trying to identify issues that may affect people from the equality strands in a negative way. Seeking SIWG advice about the issues and what

can be done to avoid affecting people from the equality strands negatively but still help the council to spend less, is very important.

- Officers have examined areas of council work in which they need to make changes between now and March 2010. They focused on those that affect current and future service users from the equality strands, most.
- Officers then looked at current practices likely to change in these work areas and considered whether there would be any negative effects on people from the equality strands. They now want to discuss their findings with SIWG.

Comments made by SIWG members

Below are comments made by SIWG members present at the meeting. Where reasonable and practical, officers will use these comments to improve what they propose to do. They will also report these comments at the meeting of the Council Executive on 20 October 2009, for councillors to consider as they make decisions about the project.

1. More for York overview

- Staff expertise needs to be listened to and used alongside expertise brought in by external consultants.
- Channel money, where it is needed the most.

- Consultation like today costs, so you should use the results in your decision-making.
- Efficiencies should not lead to losing administrators unnecessarily. Good administration is important to the effective working of CYC.
- Thanks should be conveyed to back-office staff who support the organisation and are there to answer questions and deal with customers, when other officers are busy or not available.

2. Customer services: Bringing city centre receptions together

- Think about parking facilities when reception is located at St Leonard's/Finance Centre. Increase parking spaces for the disabled; increase the amount of time one can stay when visiting Council; increase parking spaces for all; control the use of such spaces by people not visiting the Council.
- Where are your staff going to park? What if they are disabled?
- At customer centre we need more personal greeting/welcome, less automation.
- The current automated voice recognition system when people call the council is not working too well. The system is having trouble recognising even simple surnames like "Walsh".
- People with speech impediments and people who do not have English at all or as their first language or have

regional accents, find voice recognition telephony very frustrating to use. You need to look at options like allowing callers to spell out the name of the person they need.

- Phone contact is very difficult for people from ethnic minorities - older people in particular. In most cases they prefer to come in and have a face to face conversations, bringing English-speaking relatives with them to help them. If absolutely necessary, they have to ask family and friends to make calls on their behalf. This is undesirable and more support and access to translation and interpretation facilities is needed both on the phone and face to face.
- Older people take time to absorb the information, which needs to be offered slowly and clearly, using plain English.
- Use a local hard-of-hearing group to help you understand the best way to communicate with hard-of-hearing, people both face to face as well as on the phone. Same for visually impaired people.
- Phone entry systems are very difficult for hard-of-hearing customers and staff.
- You should not use phone and card entry systems for wheelchair users unless you are certain they can access them without having to get off the wheelchair.
- Having different service-access cards costs a lot. Why not have one single card that a person can use - for example, the over 60's bus pass can be used as a swimming card as well.

- If you keep our records on databases to be used for service access cards, you need to store them safely but also to share them with other public services so that users eventually carry one card for most/all public services.
- Important to have BSL translators on hand at reception points when needed. This is difficult at present.
- Use TeleTalk (for example webcams at home or in booths) to talk to staff, for use by people who cannot get into a reception area.
- Look at what personal details really need to be kept on record and seen by staff. It is important to keep records properly and access needs to be controlled, but staff need to see all relevant customer information.
- Use admin staff and tap into their knowledge.
- You need a culture change, putting the customer first.
- Invest in plain-English training for staff.
- Web and e-mail communication that contains lengthy and complicated attachments (like planning applications), should have a summary attached and give a contact person for more information.
- To communicate the changes to reception areas use:
 - Through-the-door info like ward newsletters, Your City etc
 - Ward meetings
 - Communication to parents via schools mailings
 - Stickers on refuse bins and recycling boxes

- GP receptions
- Libraries

3. Debt collection policy and practice

- Liaise better with agencies like CAB and appreciate that they have long waiting lists when you send clients to them for debt management help. This will affect how soon you can collect money from people in debt.
- Should have regular liaison meetings with CAB. Can CAB manage debt on behalf of clients gratis, like Christians Against Poverty does?
- When reviewing staff job roles, consider inserting debt counselling as a required skill. Offer debt counseling training to current staff.
- Work with the Credit Union to offer debt management advice.
- Use a focus group to include CAB (again acronyms in full) Credit Union, CAP, and other free money-management groups to help you reshape your service.
- Have open days and advice points at reception areas.
- Use "buffer" organizations to recover debt from older people and people with mental health problems.
- Use SIWG community reps to help you produce easy-read leaflets and letters .
- When you send out Council Tax bills, say "thank you" for paying last year's bill and include simple and non-alarmist info about the consequences of not paying

monies owed to Council, how to manage debt and where to find info about it.

- Try to build a relationship with vulnerable customers before they fall into debt. Visiting officers are very important to help you do this.
- Reminder letters: Recent research shows that 50% of people in debt suffer from anxiety and other mental health issues. Make sure you give enough time to customers to pay. Use clear non-threatening language. Don't use jargon. Steer customers to help and support available. Use big size font, (not sure this document is in the font agreed by SIWG?) use plain English. Work with SIWG to help you draft the letters.

4. Improving kerb-side recycling

- Given that you collect from 7:00 to 15:00, bins and boxes out on narrow pavements create problems for wheelchair users, older/infirm people, people with visual impairment and carers pushing buggies/wheelchairs etc. This problem will be made worse now, that there may be more recycling boxes.
- Boxes left out on pavement after collection fill up with water. Give boxes with holes. [Officers confirmed that boxes with holes are now available and all boxes are being changed to ones with holes incrementally.]
- Partially sighted residents find dealing with recycling bags after collection difficult. Boxes are better for them [Officers confirmed that this has been one of

reasons for doing away with bags and replacing them with boxes].

- Review qualification criteria for assisted collections. Consider that there may be able-bodied people in households who are not be able to lift and carry heavy boxes (if they are older, living alone and of slight built, for example).
- Provide boxes on wheels, but they should be light enough to push easily.
- The colour of recycling boxes may be a problem for people with visual impairment. If you cannot change the colour, identify the different boxes through tactile means.
- Please stop council services putting leaflets through the door unless absolutely necessary.
- You must try harder to explain recycling to people from different cultural background who do not understand it. Consider going where they meet to explain face-to-face (e.g. YREN open forums, Polish community meetings etc).