

**Worcestershire Shared Services
Joint Committee**

20th February 2014

Worcester City Pilot Update

Recommendation

That the Joint Committee notes the report and agree that the pilot has produced a model for real cashable savings in respect of the areas of nuisance covered during the pilot carried out by Worcester City Council and 17% efficiency savings for Worcester City in respect of planning application referrals.

That the Joint Committee agrees that Worcester City Council be provided with in year (2013/14) savings of £3746 to be funded from a top-slice of the projected end of year underspend to reflect the changes in the service provided, and reflecting 6 months of savings during 2013/14.

That the Joint Committee recommends that all partners consider introducing the pilot methodology to their own organisations when dealing with planning consultations and introduce the self help element for certain classes of nuisance complaints as indications are that useful reductions in numbers of actionable referrals are possible.

That the Joint Committee agrees that preparatory work is undertaken by WRS in consultation with partners, to consider options for extending the concept of “self-help” into other areas of work.

Introduction

The pilot exercise arose from a request by Worcester City to examine ways of delivering £40,000 additional in year savings during 2013/14. This was endorsed by the Joint Committee at their meetings on 22 November 2012 and 27 June 2013 as an aspirational saving that WRS should examine and deliver if possible, but only on the basis that it did not impact on the other partners.

The original intention was to agree service reductions/ changes, which had the potential to achieve this level of savings and implement them as a pilot from 1 April. A

Report

“menu” of fully costed options was prepared and discussed with Worcester City for their consideration. This “menu” had options to reduce/change service provision in a number of areas including;

- Air Quality
- Food hygiene Interventions
- Gull control
- Taxi enforcement
- Nuisance complaints and planning consultations

Following discussion, it was jointly decided to proceed with a pilot that involved changing the way the service was delivered with respect to planning consultations and some categories of nuisance complaints, with the intention of delivering savings and assessing the impact of these service changes. After preparing the necessary processes and documentation, which required significant input and officer time from both organisations the pilot commenced on 10 June 2013.

Planning Consultations

WRS is consulted on planning applications in relation to potential issues such as noise, contaminated land and air quality. Applications are referred for comments around noise, including traffic noise, air quality issues and any other environmental issues which could result from the development.

Officers either provide general advice, which can lead to applicants submitting further technical reports, or they may make recommendations for conditions. When additional reports are produced by applicants, officers will review them, providing some interpretation and advice to planning officers.

At the start of the pilot Worcester City were submitting approximately 150 applications a year with an estimated cost to WRS of £30-40,000. The intention of the pilot was to reduce the number of consultations significantly to achieve potential savings of up to £20,000.

The pilot involved WRS producing detailed advice for planning officers and an algorithm allowing them to make their own decisions on applications without the need to refer to WRS officers. In addition internal management systems within Worcester City were altered so that managers had to approve any referral to WRS and WRS officers checked the weekly planning list as a failsafe.

Update meetings were regularly held and the number of consultations received over each 3 month period was compared with the same period the previous year.

Nuisance Complaints

Having considered the statutory responsibilities and the professional advice of officers It was decided to include 3

areas of nuisance complaint within the scope of the pilot, namely:

- Air pollution (mainly garden bonfires)
- Rubbish and miscellaneous complaints
- Drainage

The emphasis of the pilot was to encourage complainants to help themselves, (i.e. try to deal with the problem themselves initially, only coming back to WRS if unsuccessful.) If the complaint was from multiple sources, and/or was obviously a statutory nuisance, or it was from someone classed as vulnerable, then WRS would take it up straight away.

To aid with self help, changes were made to the Worcester City web-site with advice and letter templates being posted for people to download. Duty officers were given advice and training on how to deal with complaints at the first point of contact.

It was accepted by all involved that effective communications were essential for this pilot to work and for members of the public to understand what the new process involved.

Regular update meetings were held to gauge the number of complaints received and to review comments received from members and the public.

It is accepted that initially the messages put out were not as clear as they could have been and more work was required to identify potentially vulnerable persons.

This resulted in changes to the training of WRS "Duty Officers" to reinforce the correct message, and information on the web site was amended as a result of feedback received.

These areas of work were estimated to cost WRS around £25-40,000 with approximately 150-200 complaints per year.

Outcomes

Planning Consultations:

For the pilot period 10th June to 17th December the number of planning applications referred for consultation was compared with the number referred over the same time period during the previous year.

Consultations in 2012 numbered **74**

Consultations in 2013 numbered **67**

There has been a very small reduction in referrals but Worcester City development control section indicates that there has been a 17% increase in the total number of



applications received by Worcester City Planning section over the same period.

So, the number of referrals to WRS has remained about the same, at a time where the City Council has experienced a 17% increase in workload. There is therefore a significant improvement in efficiency; however, any cashable savings are taken up by the large increase in demand in the overall number of applications received by Worcester City.

Time recording has also been initiated with respect to these consultations so that we can compare actual time needed to deliver what the planning officers require.

It is also accepted that the time period for the pilot has been limited and the longer the pilot continues for the more accurate will be the outcome and indications of potential savings. **Also if this method of working is extended to include other partners there may be real cash savings accruing if other partners have not experienced such a large increase in applications.**

Nuisance Complaints

The figures for the relevant categories are compared with the same time period last year: (to end November 2013)

Complaints in 2012 numbered **59**

Complaints in 2013 numbered **64**

Of the 64 complaints 30 were referred for self help. Of that 30, 15 complainants returned for WRS to deal with their problem. Overall therefore, WRS dealt with **49** complaints compared with **59** the previous year, with 23% of this year complaints successfully diverted to self help.

Of those 15 complaints which were referred for self help which did not return there is no feedback either from local members or from staff to indicate that the complaint has not been satisfactorily resolved without involving WRS.

The numbers coming in each year are roughly similar and so the self help route seems to be delivering real benefits and WRS and Worcester City report that both the public and members appear happy with this new approach following initial concerns.

With respect to planning consultations, the numbers referred is much the same as the previous year so there are no discernible cash savings for the time period of the pilot to date. However a 17% increase in applications to Worcester City would indicate that referrals would potentially have been much higher without the pilot thus providing real benefits to Worcester City Planning. We can see an increase in efficiency, but unfortunately not a cashable saving during this current time period, although introducing the methodology to other partners may deliver cash savings if they have not had similar increases in demand.

Financial Implications

For nuisance complaints a potential 23% reduction in the number of referrals has been achieved for the second 3-months of the pilot and there is no reason to believe that this will not continue for the next 3 months.

Care must also be taken not to draw a direct correlation between number of complaints and cost. In circumstances such as this, it is the less complicated complaints, which require less input that are most easily diverted to the self help route. Time recording is to be introduced across WRS to better enable the assessment of potential savings.

However it is accepted that a 23% drop in referrals would equate to approximately 15% savings in time and resources and that Worcester City would have saved over 6 months of the 2013/14 year and that this would equate to £3746.

Conclusion

The Worcester City pilot has indicated that the methodology chosen to address certain forms of demand has the potential to reduce the number of planning referral's and some nuisance complaints dealt with by WRS, with associated potential financial savings. Further development of the concept of "self help" to other areas is recommended.

No cashable savings have been realised by WRS during the initial period of the pilot in the area of planning referrals due to the reasons stated previously although a potential channel shift of up to 23% of nuisance referrals has been identified with potential savings of around 15%

The proportion of planning applications referred to WRS has also significantly reduced with the vast majority of the benefit derived by the Worcester City planning section.

It is recommended that the pilot methodology is formally adopted by Worcester City and all partners look to adopting this self help methodology for non-noise related nuisances.

It needs to be remembered that the pilot was intended to realise £40,000 savings in 2013/14 and that no cashable savings have accrued in planning referrals but significant efficiency savings of up to 17% have been realised.

In the area of nuisance complaints real cashable savings of 15% have been achieved and the saving could be returned to Worcester City as a top slice of the projected underspend for 2013/14 ahead of its re-distribution to partners.

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