

Serve yourself

Technology
p20



Insight investigates one council's approach to the use of Destin's touch-screen technology in the crusade to give better information to customers

Ashford Borough Council is one of 12 Enhanced Housing Options Trailblazer councils across the UK. The Trailblazer programme, run by the CLG with support from the DWP, aims to develop innovative approaches in advice services.

Trailblazers will offer a greater range of advice to people looking for housing, with some (including Ashford) moving towards a 'one stop shop' approach of personalised advice with links to housing benefit information, employment opportunities and training.

In most areas people have had to go to several different places to find the advice they need to make realistic decisions about where to live. The Trailblazers are changing this approach – advice on the full range of housing options, from social housing to privately rented properties, is linked to wider advice including claiming housing benefit and employment related advice. This ensures that people are able to make the right choice for their individual circumstances.

Ashford and Tenterden Gateways already offer a wide range of public and voluntary services, in a single convenient location in each of the towns. Joining public services together, and making them more accessible in a friendly and attractive way, improves the quality of life. The Trailblazer project aims to build upon and enhance this 'single destination' approach.

PROVIDING TAILORED INFORMATION EFFICIENTLY

Colin Green, Housing Plus Project Manager at Ashford Borough Council, talks about how advice kiosks have enhanced their service: "We concluded that one of the most efficient ways of providing a wide range of information is to allow our customers opportunities to 'self-service' via touch screen kiosks. Touch screen technology itself is not new, but before we came across Destin's ENQUIRE packages we would not have known how to apply the technology quickly and easily

in this scenario. ENQUIRE was perfect, because the hardware, software content and support came as one package, provided by one company.

"What we particularly liked was the fact that the content was developed with us by Destin and that they adapted the core content for us, so that it now reflects the full range of options offered by Ashford – the application is interlinked with advice on housing, employment and benefits.

"The content is designed in such a way as to maximise the 'touch screen' nature of the kiosk. We did not just want a link to the existing content on our website, we wanted the kiosk to be as interactive as possible.

Housing benefit information

Training

Employment opportunities

"We are realistic enough to know that some people will always want to see an adviser in person, and that there are many situations in which personal advice is essential. The kiosk is not designed to replace the human element and contact that some of our customers are looking for, it is there to

enable customers to understand what is available and what to do next, which in turn frees up our advisers to be more productive and focused.

"The kiosk content is also available via the internet, so existing computer equipment can be used in places such as the library. This ensures that the information we are providing at all our offices is consistent and accessible to a wide range of users."

REFERRING IN TO OTHER SERVICES

The kiosks not only contain useful information, but also incorporate an interactive referral form that enables the council's customers to seek further help and advice.

The customer completes the referral form with their personal details and the advice they are looking for, the completed form is then emailed to the relevant service department, from where the council can contact the customer and provide the advice they are looking for. The application also retains a record of the enquiry so they can receive management reports on the volumes of referrals received through this interactive and innovative approach.

WHAT ABOUT FUTURE CHANGES?

Colin's last words identify that the project will not stand still: "The services offered through Housing Plus will not stay the same, and we will be looking to enhance the range of information we provide through the kiosk." Appointments can be made to see Ashford's advice kiosks by contacting housingplus@ashford.gov.uk.

