

REACH - Community Briefing Event

Realising Equality of Access at the Community Hub

Background

Improving access to services was the main focus of a briefing event hosted by Colchester Borough Council at the Library and Community Hub on 13 September 2017. Led by the Customer Support Team, the event drew together an invited audience from more than 10 local community groups to explore ways of breaking down barriers and maximising access to services provided by the three key partners located at the Community Hub: Colchester Borough Council, Colchester Borough Homes and Essex County Council.

Welcome

Pam Donnelly, Colchester Borough Council's Strategic Director of Customer & Relationships, welcomed representatives from East Anglian Indian Association, Victim Support, Community360, The Night Shelter, Essex Fire & Rescue Service, Fair Access Colchester and others, to the REACH event.

The Library and Community Hub is a busy and vibrant partnership space, offering a range of frontline and other services to residents of Colchester, which has gained a reputation for supportive and innovative customer service since it opened in December 2013.

Guests heard about the different ways individuals are able to access services, how effective partnership working maximises access, and the ways the Council is helping to overcome barriers to access and inclusion shaped by issues such as language, opening hours, how customers access services, and the way advice is delivered.

Council staff leading and supporting this event included Jason Granger, Sarah Eveleigh, Andrew Harley, Sarah Thompson, Ann Offord, Tracey Brushett and Leonie Rathbone.

The Tour

The event progressed to an interactive tour of the Library and Community Hub, aimed at showcasing the partnership work which is providing services to some of the most vulnerable residents using the community space. It included:

- Ground Floor (Express Zone)
Assisted Self-Serve and Go Online; Customer Experience and the Triage process; 'Set up' Zone and the Children's Zone (with the Sensory, Summer Read and Rhyme Time areas)
- First Floor
Booths/ Registrar Services; One to One support for vulnerable customers; Housing Triage and complex Housing Benefit and Council Tax enquiries; DHPs (Discretionary Housing Payments) and EHPs (Exceptional Hardship Payments), LAIEF (Local Authority Information Exchange Form); Budget Planning help for Universal Credit Customers; The Welfare Reform Team; CAB/ Community 360; and the Coffee Shop!
- Second Floor
Interview rooms; Housing Options (Colchester Borough Homes); Security Protocol; Meeting rooms/ sensitive conversations.

The tour was followed by a question and answer session, and finally refreshments.

Pam Donnelly said: "This was an extremely useful event, and a fantastic opportunity to be open and transparent about the services on offer at The Library and Community Hub... Everyone who took part shares our interest and commitment to overcoming the barriers that can prevent our customers from accessing the services and the support they deserve. By sharing our experiences, and guided by the feedback provided by everyone involved in the event, we will be better able to tailor the support and advice we offer to some of the most vulnerable customers using our services."

Cllr Beverley Oxford, Portfolio Holder for Customers, added: "I am immensely proud of the collaborative work and vision that has made the ground-breaking Community Hub such an innovative and vibrant facility."

Outcomes and Feedback

A number of access and other issues were raised at the event, and these are being addressed by staff where required. Issues included those relating to: community groups using the Library and Community Hub; access to Council sports facilities by minority ethnic communities; tackling homelessness; and reporting hate crime.



Thanks to everyone who took part in the REACH event and for sharing our aspiration to remove the barriers that can prevent our customers from accessing services. By coming together at community events such as these, we continue to make the Library and Community Hub an even more welcoming and easy-to-use centre for all of Colchester's residents.

Positive feedback about the day was provided by those who attended:

"Thanks for your help and well done on a helpful and informative event."

“It was very interesting, and impressive... I think word will get around.”