



Equalities Committee
7 April 2016

**Report from the Strategic Director
Resources**

Information

Wards affected:
ALL

**Report on Digital Inclusion and Online Accessibility for
Brent residents**

1.0 Summary

In October 2014 Cabinet formally agreed a new Community Access Strategy which set out a vision for transforming the way in which our residents are able to access information, advice and services. The strategy seeks to create modern and relevant access arrangements that are tailored to meet the needs of differing demographic groups, help us to respond positively to the difficult financial pressures we face and to target our most personalised contact arrangements to those who are most vulnerable and have more complex needs. The overall aims of the strategy are to :

- Develop a consistent and excellent experience for our residents whenever and however they make contact with us
- Develop Community access arrangements that are designed to meet the differing needs of our residents, and focused on the Community not internal service boundaries
- Develop an improved digital offer, better confidence in digital access channels and significantly increase take up and use of digital access channels
- Improve the efficiency of resident's access arrangements so as to better manage demand, remove duplication and failure and prevent demand arising in the first place

1.1 The strategy is being delivered through a portfolio of projects that commenced in early 2015. These projects have included significant work to improve Brent's on line offer to our residents, making it easier to use and extending the range of services and information available through digital channels so that residents can access these when they want rather than having to rely on more traditional access channels such as phone or face to face contact.

1.2 This briefing provides an overview of the arrangements that have been put in place to ensure that digital / on line services are accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents, particularly those who face barriers to self-serve due to their age, disability, language and/or socio-economic status. It is important to note the development of our digital offer has not limited access to other contact channels and has in fact increased access options. Residents can still phone, write, email and visit face to face if they chose to do so and can obtain assistance to use self service facilities at the Civic Centre Customer Services Centre. The only exception to this is parking services where there is no longer an option to visit a face to face access point.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Equalities Committee are asked to:

- note the contents of this report and the range of online services that are available to customers to date

3.0 Detail

3.1 There are a number of strands to Brent's overall digital offer for residents. These include :

- The information, advice and signposting available through our main website
- The facility to apply, report, book or pay for a range of services on line
- The facility enabling residents to manage and view accounts on line for Council Tax and Housing Benefits, with access to BHP rent accounts shortly becoming available
- The facility for residents to create a personalised " My Account " which enables them to access a range of services through one log in and password and conveniently access services through a personalised account without having to navigate through numerous web pages.
- The facility to report environmental issues through the Cleaner Brent App including litter, illegal rubbish dumping, and other problems in streets, parks and cemeteries

3.2 The Brent website has been designed so as to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) requirements to AA standard. These are international web standards which specify how to ensure content is accessible, particularly for people with disabilities—but also through devices such as tablets, smart phones and mobile phones. There are over 60

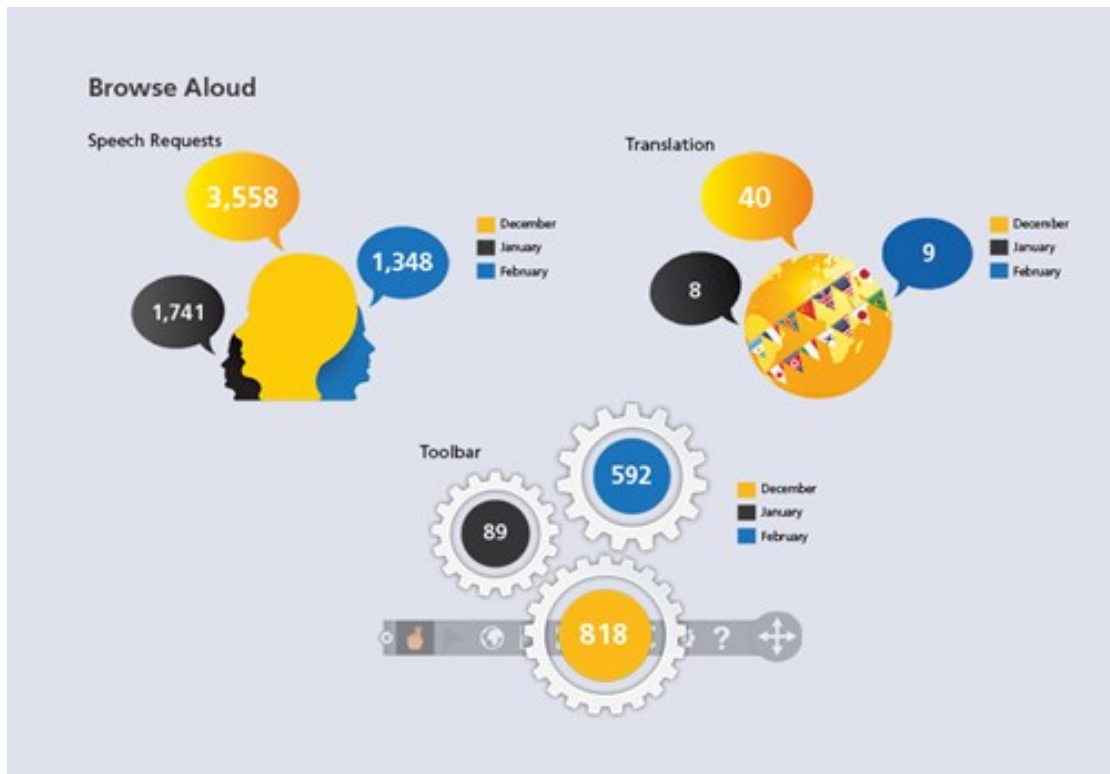
standards and examples include: captions with videos for sight impaired user, ability to change font sizes or colours and consistent use of menus, icons and buttons throughout a website. Of course compliance to AA standards cannot be relied upon exclusively to eliminate barriers to on line access however it does provide an important design feature which supports this.

3.3 To further improve the accessibility of our website a new feature called Browse Aloud went live in July 2015. This is a versatile tool that enables anyone using the Brent website to adapt the way content is displayed, to meet their specific needs. It's features include :

- A button to convert text to speech for the visually impaired or assist those with literacy or learning disabilities such as dyslexia to be able to access information easily.
- A screen mask which allows users to light up lines of text as they move through a page- making it easier to focus on a few lines at a time
- A simplify tool- that simplifies the text content on a page to make this easier to read
- A text magnifier that enables users to adjust font size to suit their needs
- A translation tool which covers over 150 languages .With over 150 languages spoken in Brent and with up to 20% of households where no one speaks English, this is a really important feature

Browse Aloud is available from every web page and is clearly visible at the top of each page as an orange icon.

3.4 The diagram below provides details of Browse Aloud usage between December 2015 and February 2016. What is clear is that the most popular features are speech related- either in English or other languages. It can also be seen that the number of users increased significantly in December, specifically over the Christmas period. This is likely to be related to the fact that phone and face to face services are were not available and residents were accessing our website to find out information or access services.



- 3.5 A joint Customer Insight Survey was carried out in October 2014 between Brent Customer Services (BCS) and four Job Centre Plus (JCP) offices in Brent to better understand how our residents contact us and how satisfied they are. This survey only covered residents who are in receipt on Housing Benefit and thus is not representative of the population as a whole. It has however helped us to understand the basic barriers that some of our most vulnerable residents may face in trying to access on line services.
- 3.6 The survey was carried out from 1st October to 31st October 2014 and we received 954 responses. Of those surveyed, under a quarter (22.3%) advised they didn't have access to a computer and 8.8% didn't have access to the internet from home (broadband) . However separate studies have indicated that most households do have access to mobile devices such as smart phones or tablets and thus could access on line services provided information is displayed in a mobile responsive way- typically this requires automatic formatting of information to fit the screen size. The Brent website is mobile responsive as is the My Account facility within it. Mobile responsiveness is now a requirement of all new on line services and where possible we will work with existing on line services to evaluate how this could be achieved.
- 3.7 Free e learning training packages are available to all Brent library users and these cover basic navigation and how to set up an email account. Library staff are available to assist residents with basic navigation as are Customer Services Officers in the Civic Centre Customer Services Centre. There are 34 self service PCs available specifically for access to Brent services in the Customer Services' Centre (28) and the Library at Willesden (6) and Customer Services staff provide assistance to those who are not computer literate or lack confidence in using on line services. Prior to the launch of the

new “ My Account ” we trained a range of voluntary and community organisations on how to set up and access services using My Account. This is helping to ensure that residents can access support across the Borough , not just by visiting Council buildings.

3.7 The My Account facility went live in late October 2015 as part of our wider plans to improve our digital offer to residents. This has been designed to WCAG AA standard and is mobile responsive. It allows residents to access services securely and easily through one log in and password, avoiding the need to navigate and search for services, using any device at a time that is convenient to them. A range of help facilities have been incorporated to assist and guide residents using the facility, including videos, frequently asked questions and prompts which clearly state the information required to authenticate access to a service, for example Council Tax Account number. Since going live nearly 30,000 residents have created a My Account and numbers continue to rise on a weekly basis. We are planning to hold resident focus groups during 2016 to gain feedback on experience of creating and using the Account, in particular seeking feedback from protected groups such as the elderly, disabled or those experiencing language barriers. This along with analytics of user journeys will inform future improvements and developments. My Account also enables users to rate their experience whilst accessing services through it and this feedback has already helped us to improve help facilities and navigation through the site.

3.8 The following provides a summary of the results of a survey of web site visitors undertaken in July 2015 .

62% found it easy to find what they were looking for
70% thought the wording on the website was clear
63% were able to complete they set out to do on the website
81% were confident using on line services

15% of respondents considered themselves to have a disability- this is broadly comparable to Brent’s overall Borough profile
36% of respondents were white- this is broadly in line with Brent’s Borough profile
29% of respondents were Asian- this is slightly lower than Brent’s Borough profile of 34%
17% of respondents were black- this is broadly in line with Brent’s Borough profile
2% of respondents stated that their gender identity was different to that assumed at birth.(comparison to Borough profile not known)

3.9 The survey indicates that residents from all protected characteristics are accessing on line services and there is no significant under representation when compared to the overall Borough profile. There is work to do to improve residents experience when accessing the web and over the past year significant work has been undertaken to improve content, search facilities and navigations. Work is also underway to introduce a simple web survey on all main pages that will help to inform further improvements.

3.10 Preparation for Universal Credit (UC) and Digital Inclusion

As part of the wider Welfare Reform agenda, Universal Credit is currently being rolled out nationally. Brent is currently for single claimants only so there has been only minimum impact up to this point. However between 2017 and 2020 Universal Credit will be rolled out to over 40,000 Brent residents and this will have a significant impact for them and for Brent.

3.11 Universal Credit customers will be expected to apply online and will be expected to maintain their claim electronically too. This will include reporting any changes, getting updates for interviews and keeping their job search records. Whilst this is a common feature of Brent's existing Housing Benefit service, it is clear that DWP do not plan to provide the level of support and assistance that we are currently offering to our residents. Brent's proactive support in supporting residents to access on line services now is helping our residents to be better prepared to manage their Universal Credit claim when their claim migrates to DWP. Digital skills are also increasingly becoming an essential skill for work and life – including shopping, banking, insurance and tax. We are working closely with DWP to ensure that help is specifically targeted to working age Housing Benefit claimants to ensure that they develop the basic digital skills required to claim and maintain their Universal Credit claim.

3.12 Work is continuing in the development of our digital / on line offering with a further 11 services becoming available through My Account over the next 12 months.

Background Papers

None

Contact Officers

Margaret Read
Director of Brent Customer Services

STEPHEN HUGHES
Strategic Director, Resources