

1 April 2009

Chelmsford Borough Council

Council service podcasts in different languages

Summary of policy/project

Podcasts were made available on the corporate website in a number of different languages. The audio format is more accessible than written format, and it provides the potential for significant cost savings

give people an overview of the services on offer from the Council and other public bodies, and signpost ways they could get more information and support.

What problems does the policy/project solve?

Description

Chelmsford Borough Council is committed to ensuring that information about our services is as accessible as possible to all our customers. We are also careful to use as cost-effective methods as possible in order to achieve this. While Chelmsford has a comparatively low percentage of residents who do not speak English as a first language, we believe that the few who struggle with English should not be prevented from accessing our services because of it. Being mindful of the high costs of translation, we decided to investigate ways of utilising our website to provide information in alternative languages to those who needed it most. We conducted an online survey to establish which languages most people preferred information in, after English, which was targeted at people visiting the existing 'Help in Your Language' page. The three languages chosen as the most popular in the poll were Polish, French and Spanish, which, between them, made up 45 per cent of all responses. While the poll was running, the team drafted the content, focusing on topics which would be important to people new to the area, especially if they were coming from abroad, such as housing and benefits. The podcasts aimed to

Our understanding of our customers means that we realise the wider target group we can reach by using this format. Whilst literacy levels in mother tongue may be low in some communities, the spoken word enables more people to understand key messages. We know for example that in many African countries, because of the history of colonisation, French and Spanish are commonly spoken alongside indigenous languages and that many Slovakian or Lithuanians can understand and speak Polish, although they may not be able to read it. By utilising our website, for a one-off cost, thousands if not millions of users can download and listen to the podcast over and over again at no additional cost to us. This should also reduce the frequency and length of occasions when we have to use a telephone translation service which means more cost savings. Our customers should also feel empowered to access information about our services immediately and thereby feel more part of the community. This project was also something of a pilot for us in the use of podcast technology and with it proving such as a success, we are confident of its wider application for communicating a broad range of information and initiatives.

Localis is constantly looking for good new ideas to showcase. If you would like to make a submission to Localis' Big Ideas—please contact Tom Shakespeare via email on tom@localis.org.uk or phone 0207 340 2660

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Has the idea worked elsewhere?

Podcasts are now a mainstream communication tool for a broad range of organisations with corporate websites. However, according to the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), we are the first Local Authority to use this particular form of podcast, for this specific purpose.

What is the cost of implementation?

The total cost of the project was £1,700, with £380 going towards translation, and the rest on hire of the voice-over artists and the recording studio. A further £850 was spent in producing a video, containing the same content, but this time translated into British Sign Language, with subtitles.

What were the difficulties of implementation?

There were no technical difficulties encountered. Generally speaking, we do occasionally get complaints from residents objecting to money being spent on providing language services for those whose first language is not English, and while we remain committed to doing this, we can argue at least that this is in fact costing us a very minimal amount. We always remind such complainants that, as Council Tax payers themselves, even non-English speakers have just as much right to access our services as anyone else. If we expect people to meet their responsibilities such as paying their Council Tax on time, we need to make it clear how to do this, in a way they can understand, and the consequences if they don't. In the long term, it saves Council Tax payers money, by not spending money on avoidable legal costs.

What is the evidence of success?

In its 2008 Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the Audit Commission praised the Council for its improvement in the area of customer service, saying it was "effectively increasing access to services for local people." They cited the podcasts as evidence of this improvement, and the Council was promoted from a 'Good' rating to an 'Excellent' rating. The number of times the Council used its telephone translation service, Language Line, fell following the introduction of the podcasts. In 2007, it was used 16 times, but in 2008 that dropped to 12, representing a 25 per cent reduction, and helping the Council achieve significant savings. We have also received positive media coverage about the initiative, both locally and in Local Government press.

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Would this work in other Councils?

From a technological standpoint, the project was very straight forward, and shouldn't present any problems to other authorities. However, the languages used would have to vary according to local populations, and councils may sometimes find this information difficult to come by.

What advice would you give any Councils wishing to adopt this idea?

Any council wishing to embark on a similar project should try to gather as much data as possible on the languages spoken in their community, as the three languages we chose may not be appropriate for other parts of the country. This can be the hardest part, but it is also the most important, as immigrant populations can vary enormously across the country. They would need to carefully research the common languages amongst their communities, have an understanding of the dialects spoken and possible issues with literacy levels within parts of the community. If statistics are hard to come by, authorities can try other methods, such as connecting with local community and voluntary groups, or trying to target the initial research as we did with the online poll.

Other Comments

We are continuing to monitor requests for languages in order to be able to provide our information in additional languages, if the demand dictates. We are wary of spending large sums of money on large scale translations which still may not be accessible to our residents. Our aim is to have an evidence-and-needs-based response to information in other languages.

For more information

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