Trends in public information provision: an analysis of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire

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Trends in public information provision: an analysis of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire

by

Michael P. Wilson, B.A.(Hons)

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fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
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Supervisor: Professor Margaret Evans, B.A., M.B.A., PhD., P.G.C.E.,
F.L.A., F.I.Inf. Sc., Professor of Information Studies,
Department of Information and Library Studies

Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, in the context of current national thinking about public information provision. Data has been collected primarily from interviews with staff involved with one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, local authority documents, a user survey, and a variety of secondary sources. Comparisons are drawn with two other English shire counties.

This study demonstrates that one-stop shops perform a number of core functions for local government in Buckinghamshire, as elsewhere in England and Wales. They provide a single point for channelling public feedback, project a corporate identity, raise the profile of public services, and help to realise a newly found aim of becoming more customer orientated. In order to fulfil these developing roles, one-stop shops are incorporating partnerships between local authorities, as well as with community organisations, to become the focal point for a community's information requirements.

In Buckinghamshire, as elsewhere, one-stop shops are increasingly utilising new information technology to disseminate information spanning a multiplicity of organisations. Yet, the ability of such technology, at least for the present, to meet the information needs of a whole community would appear limited. The Buckinghamshire case study demonstrates that convergence is occurring between one-stop shops and public libraries, offering a number of benefits to both services. Whilst it is shown that a great deal of service planning has been undertaken in Buckinghamshire, one-stop shops would benefit further from the setting of clear, quantifiable objectives within a time-frame.

The Buckinghamshire case study also demonstrates that one-stop shops have been greatly affected by the political environment within which they operate, both within and between local authorities, and through local and national political concerns. Despite such difficulties, the one-stop shop concept has become firmly embedded in Buckinghamshire, and offers pointers to the future direction of information provision and communication flow with the public, in Buckinghamshire as well as in other counties.

ii

Acknowledgements

Contents

Chapter 3: The planning and implementation of the one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire

Chapter 4: The political environment within which one-stop shops operate in Buckinghamshire

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Bibliography

Appendices

Introduction

Background to the study

This dissertation has been undertaken after consultation with the Head of Library, Information, Museum and Archive Service, (LIMA), Buckinghamshire County Council. Following the reorganisation of the County Council in 1996, to adapt to the outcomes of the Local Government Review, LIMA assumed responsibility for County Council involvement in one-stop shops. For the purposes of this study, the phrase one-stop shop will be used in the context of local authority information centres.

Why study the one-stop shop?

Within English and Welsh local authorities there is considerable support for the notion of single-point, multi-dimensional council information centres and, accordingly, the provision of one-stop shops is on the increase. Some research has been carried out on the provision of one-stop shops, most notably Dawson's 1995 survey of English and Welsh local authorities in, *An investigation into local authority information centres or one-stop shops.* Yet the provision of integrated public information is a rapidly developing area, not least due to new information technology, which will require a greater degree of systematic research. As one interviewee commented during the study; "councils are spending a lot of money on setting up one-stop shops, but there are no national guidelines as to how this should be achieved"(1). If local authorities are to continue to allocate resources to and promote the development of one-stop shops, then a closer examination of their aims and methods for achieving these is required. It is hoped that this study, by focussing on the provision of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, will constitute one step in this direction.

Aim

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, in the context of current national thinking about public information provision. Chapter One will review the significant factors behind the national trend towards one-stop shop provision; the different types of one-stop shops and their role within local government in England and Wales; and the level of public library involvement with one-stop shops. Chapter Two will provide an understanding of the factors which caused the establishment of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, and how the one-stop shop concept has evolved in the county. Chapter Three will evaluate the planning and implementation of a one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire. Chapter Four will analyse the various political factors which have formed the environment within which one-stop shops operate. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the findings in each chapter and draw these together to form a conclusion.

In summary the aim of this study is to provide an insight into the various factors at work behind the establishment and development of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, and the planning and implementation of the service in the county. It also aims to offer an evaluation of the service to date, and offers some pointers as to the future provision of public information and communication flow, both in Buckinghamshire and elsewhere.

Methodology

This investigation has been undertaken with an open mind, with no political axe to grind. Secondary sources consulted relate to various aspects. Dawson's investigation into one-stop shop provision in England and Wales provides useful data for understanding one-stop shops in a national context. A review of literature, including; Abell, *An information policy for Business Link Hertfordshire*, regarding Business Link was undertaken for comparative data of a similar information based one-stop shop. Sources relating to local government in England and Wales generally, and its changing relationship with the public specifically, were

consulted, including; Gyford, *Citizens, consumers and councils: local government and the public*. Texts on the development of information technology and community information systems, which are becoming increasingly important to one-stop shops were reviewed, such as; Bellamy (et al) *Exchanging information with the public: from one-stop shops to community information systems*. With public libraries increasingly becoming involved in the development of one-stop shops, literature examining contemporary trends in public libraries was also consulted, including amongst others; Kinnell (ed), *Informing communities: the role of libraries and information services*. Kinnell and MacDougall, *Meeting the marketing challenge: strategies for public libraries and leisure services*, provides a framework from which an evaluation of the planning and implementation of the one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire is undertaken.

The majority of primary data was collected during interviews with staff connected with one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, from Buckinghamshire County Council, Wycombe District Council, Chiltern District Council and South Buckinghamshire District Council. A Town, District, County Councillor involved with one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire was interviewed for a political perspective. Primary data was also collected from Buckinghamshire County Council committee and sub-committee minutes, and from council documents relating to organisational strategy and the planning and implementation of one-stop shops, which were made available for the study. Government publications regarding public libraries, local government and the Local Government Review, as well as a 1995 Audit Commission publication; *Talk back: local authority communication with citizens*, provided valuable primary data for understanding the background to one-stop shops. A user-survey, consisting of open ended questions, was conducted at a one-stop shop in Buckinghamshire, in order to gain qualitative primary data relating to the customer perspective for this service.

For comparative primary data, interviews were conducted with staff involved with one-stop shops in Cambridgeshire County Council and Bedfordshire County Council. Also, the Internet provides a valuable primary source for local authority and community information Web-sites, such as; URL: http://www.hertslib.hertscc.gov.uk., and; URL: http://www.open.gov.uk.

3

Limitations of the study

This study provides an evaluation of the particular circumstances which led to the establishment of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire and their implementation and effectiveness in the county. Although these circumstances may be similar to other authorities in England and Wales which provide one-stop shops, it is beyond the scope of this study to offer national guidelines on the basis of the workings of a single county.

Given the constraints of time and length of the study, the majority of primary data was collected from County and district councils, which have been the significant contributors to one-stop shop projects in Buckinghamshire. The role of parish/town councils and community organisations in the planning and implementation of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire has been very much secondary, and was consequently researched mainly from secondary sources.

At the time of research, Buckinghamshire County Council had not established links with Aylesbury Vale District Council in relation to one-stop shops. Given that this study was undertaken with the supervision of Buckinghamshire County Council, it was therefore impractical to interview any staff from Aylesbury Vale District Council. Although Aylesbury Vale have no immediate plans to establish one-stop shops, data relating to their information dissemination strategy was collected from primary documents and during interviews with local government colleagues.

References

1. Interview with Victoria Massett, Wycombe District Council, Princes Risborough, 10 July 1997.

Chapter 1:   The one-stop shop in a national context

1.1   Definitions and background to the one-stop shop

The term one-stop shop has been in existence for a number of years. The one-stop shop is commonly understood to be a single place where a customer can buy various inter-related products such as foodstuffs, clothing or motor car accessories and spare parts. In the last few years, this concept has evolved to include a place where a member of the public, or customer, can obtain, either free of charge, or through purchase, information services relating to a particular theme or aspect. Such a development may be seen as an illustration of what the 1997 Department of National Heritage review of public libraries refers to as the advent of an, "Information Age" (1). In this scenario, information acquires an increasingly central role in the lives of individuals and the functioning of organisations, with the resultant need for information to be managed and disseminated effectively. It is also worth noting that the contemporary one-stop shop concept has been embraced by the public sector, reflecting a growing trend to view the people it serves as customers.

One example of this trend came with the announcement, by the Department for Trade and Industry in 1992, of the Business Link initiative. This aims to offer, at a single point of access, a wide range of business information services held by various agencies: Chambers of Commerce, Training and Enterprise Councils, local enterprise agencies, business clubs and specialist services (2). The Department for Trade and Industry proposed that "the consortia of agencies should get together, review and rationalise their services and offer them through a common partnership, or 'one-stop shop'"(3). This year has seen the beginnings of another initiative, a collaboration between a private company and the Law Society, to provide a one-stop shop offering information and advice to potential house buyers (4).

The difficulty in defining a one-stop shop for council information comes from the very broad and generic usage of the phrase. It appears that in each local authority the one-stop shop can differ enormously in the range and type of information and advice offered. This in turn, depends upon various factors, including the type of authority offering the service, the

geographic area for which it will serve, and what the service aims to achieve within the allotted resources. As Dawson found whilst researching the one-stop shop in England and Wales in 1995, local authorities have developed many models, some not strictly one-stop in scope. "The term has become widely used, and in practice many authorities may operate a first-stop service, this is a front line office where the public can direct his/her service enquiry" (5) In the light of this, the loose definition of a one-stop shop given by Bostedt, when referring to the Swedish experience, would seem most appropriate: "an office which locally supplies the public with easily accessible information...the fundamental idea, is to gather public information in one place under one roof to make it conveniently accessible to citizens"(6).

1.2 The importance of information provision

Information is widely acknowledged as playing a key role in the democratic process. This is illustrated by Harris, who refers to the need for freedom of access to information. "Information has been described as the currency of democracy. It follows that access to information is fundamental to democracy, since inaccessible information is not informing anyone. And since access is not neutral, but calls for action, if we are concerned to promote democracy then we must promote access to information actively" (7).

This clearly has implications for local government and its procedures for information provision. In 1995, the Audit Commission published a document highlighting the importance of local authority communication and information delivery. "The provision of accurate and timely information to the communities they serve has therefore been a core function of local government"(8), in which, "good communication with the public is the responsibility of everyone"(9). To adopt Harris' view, for local government to do otherwise would be to impede the democratic process.

1.3   The national trend towards one-stop shop provision

In 1992, Dawson carried out the first comprehensive survey of local authority one-stop shop provision (10). With a response rate of 45%, this survey provides relevant information in understanding the national development of one-stop shops. Significantly, Dawson found that in all the different types of local authority, the one-stop shop phenomenon barely existed before 1984 (11). Of all the respondents, (with one exception) it was only non-metropolitan district councils which had "a well established tradition of one-stop shop provision dating back in one case to the late 1940s, with more than 20% of the sample established before 1980" (12) Although this seems to suggest that non-metropolitan district councils were the one-stop shop innovators, further research may question this assumption. As one interviewee in the Buckinghamshire case study said, "Area offices (for non-metropolitan district councils) have always existed"(13). Rather than disseminating council information, these offices have acted primarily as payment centres for council tax and rent, in mainly rural districts where access to district council offices is restricted. Given these circumstances, the one-stop shop would appear to have developed from local government efforts to increase the provision of publicly accessible information since the early 1980s.

Dawson's survey shows that until 1988, the growth of one-stop shops had been very gradual, with only twelve responding authorities having established one to this point (14). By 1992, the number of one-stop shops established had steadily increased to sixty (15). This represents roughly a quarter of responding authorities. Although Dawson's survey does not cover the development of one-stop shops since 1992, two factors suggest that their growth has continued. Firstly, of the 146 authorities who responded that they had not established a one-stop shop, approximately fifty stated that they were planning to do so (16). Secondly, a predominant reason cited by respondents for not developing a one stop-shop was the impending Local Government Review (17). Now that the Review has been concluded, this situation may change, as the Buckinghamshire case study which follows will illustrate.

1.4   Local authorities and the provision of information prior to one-stop shops

Local authorities have, of course, always provided information to the public through a variety of channels. Yet, traditionally these channels can be characterised as being only one-way in nature. This is highlighted in a 1992 survey, undertaken for the Department of Environment into public perceptions of local government. This found that the vast majority of people received information from their council/s via posters, leaflets, library notice boards and the media (18). According to Burns (et al), amongst other local government analysts, this lack of communication between the council and public was symptomatic of the way in which local authorities viewed the people they served. "While there were important exceptions it was often the case that the authority had a 'we know best' attitude to the public", in which the public interest was served, "but too often the public interest was defined without reference to the views of the clients"(19).

Similarly, Gyford's study into local government and the public found that local authorities had distanced themselves from the communication process to the extent that when the public did try to contact the council, they may well be " passed around from office to office or from one telephone extension to another"(20). Yet Gyford argues that from the mid-1970s local authorities had begun to reappraise the way they identified with the public (21). This involved seeing the people they served less as clients for whom decisions were taken and more as citizens or consumers, with a greater degree of participation in council affairs. One example of this is how, in 1986, a London council leader "referred to 'pressure groups coming out of our ears' when asked about the authority's links with groups in the community"(22). However, the reappraisal process identified by Gyford lacked penetration. Even by 1992, after a dozen years of extensive change in local government, 40% of respondents to the Department of Environment survey felt that information about council services were either, " 'fairly' or 'very' inadequate"(23).

One aspect of the poor showing of local authorities in this regard is public confusion about which council or department to contact in order to pursue a public service issue. As noted

during a local government public relations seminar in 1983, "one of the problems facing ordinary people who want to communicate with the council is to know who to telephone. Because our structures are so different, a very sophisticated awareness of how a particular local authority works is needed before you know who you want to talk to about a particular problem"(24).

Another problem caused by the inadequate flow of information to members of the public is the consequent lack of knowledge about what council services exist. The 1992 Department of Environment survey into public perceptions of local government found that individuals from the " higher socio-economic groups" were more likely to contact the council than those from lower socio-economic groups (25). The survey concludes that "it is not those who know least about council services who contact people to find out more"(26). Alternatively, by adopting Harris' view that access to information needs to be actively pursued, it could be argued that by not doing this, local authorities have been unable to fully communicate their services to lower socio-economic groups, arguably those most in need of them.

1.5   The role of the one-stop shop in the local authority

Local government has, over the last two decades, undergone considerable upheaval. Davis describes how, "just about every aspect of every part of local government in Britain has been, and continues to be, subjected to fundamental change"(27). Local government commentators have stressed that several factors, such as, customer care, equal opportunities, compulsory competitive tendering and changing demographic trends have all led to such change. As Coleman states: "It's impossible to say whether one is more significant than another or to be specific about the cause and effect relationship"(28). However, when combined, these factors have influenced the direction of local government change, and with it, the development of local authority one-stop shops.

Gyford attributes the changing nature of local government to two trends: "One is the gradual move away from a predominantly urban and industrial society...The other is the emergence of a less deferential, more assertive political culture"(29). These, Gyford argues, have not

9

only altered the system of local government, but have also contributed to new forms of politics at a national level (30). Indeed, central government initiatives have had a profound impact upon local government during this period. Burns (et al) refer to local government having to respond to "a maelstrom of legislation emanating from Whitehall" (31). Central government has driven much of the change in local authorities through a number of Acts of Parliament , the Local Government Review, and Audit Commission recommendations since 1983, and initiatives such as the 1991 Citizen's Charter.

Much of the focus for change in local government has centred on what is widely acknowledged as being their transformation from a providing to an enabling form of local governance. Under the enabling model, local authorities have a responsibility to secure, but not necessarily to provide, all public services. This has meant that a local authority has had to undergo a "shift in the way it organises its activities and the way it relates to the public it serves"(32). Therefore, as Coleman explains, although local authorities may no longer provide services such as health, transport or water, they "still consider it important that they represent the views of local residents in respect of those services"(33). Worrall contends that local authority representation comes from an increasing need to "monitor service delivery against a rigorous set of performance criteria"(34). This requires a greater degree of feedback about service performance from those who receive the service. Bynoe, in an article highlighting the limitations of the previous government's Citizen's Charter initiative, nevertheless acknowledges its role in increasing local authority feedback as it, "stresses the need to better inform users about services, thus enabling them to make a complaint about poor or deficient services"(35). Also, in 1994, the Audit Commission "identified a quality service as one which would, 'provide effective communication with the user and reflect an understanding of the user's needs and wants'"(36). It is within this context that the one-stop shop fulfils a key function in the enabling authority, by providing one easily accessible contact point for "channelling customer feedback"(37).

Another role of the one-stop shop within the new structure of local government is of projecting a co-ordinated corporate identity. As services become fragmented between a number of providers, local authorities must place a higher priority upon, what Coleman refers to as, the need for a "strong local authority led strategic vision"(38). Yet, as the Audit

Commission pointed out in 1995, removing responsibility for service delivery from the "controlling centre" presents difficulties in "projecting a consistent image of the authority"(39). The one-stop shop plays a key role in averting this, by promoting from a central point, the values, the purposes, and the aims of the local authority. Tizard and Holman, formerly of Bedfordshire County Council surmise that, "a visible corporate presence via one-stop shops helps establish a relationship with a community, rebuilding the credibility and identity of the local authority"(40).

The promotional role of the one-stop shop also involves raising public awareness about council services. As previously indicated, local authorities have traditionally placed a low priority to fostering communication channels for promotional purposes. But increasingly, as Fedorico (et al) illustrate, "with an interest in provision of quality services, getting closer to the public, consumer participation and value for money, local authorities are keen to inform their users and potential users about the services they provide"(41). The one-stop shop, often located in the heart of a community, becomes an accessible point of contact between the public and local authority. Dawson highlights this by calling the one-stop shop, " the interface between the public and the authority"(42). Consequently, the one-stop shop has the potential to raise the profile of public services offered to a higher proportion of the community than was previously the case. By providing accessible and accurate information, the one-stop shop facilitates local authority's increasing requirements to demonstrate the provision of quality, value for money and accountable services.

A significant factor behind the impetus for change in local government is described by the Audit Commission as, "the drive towards consumer empowerment"(43). This is further echoed by Paul Martin, speaking as Assistant Chief Executive, Cambridgeshire County Council, who believes that there is now, "an increasing sense of the rights of individual citizens"(44). Private sector approaches to 'getting closer to the customer' have become so widespread in local authorities that Burns (et al) argue that, "customer care is becoming the dominant public service management ideology"(45). This, in turn, has influenced local authorities to provide more than merely the statutory levels of information to users. As the Audit Commission demonstrates, "The emphasis is increasingly on the provision of information that will enable citizens to demand and receive good quality public

services"(46).

One-stop shops have enabled local authorities to achieve this customer orientated approach to service provision. From the customer perspective, one-stop shops effectively break down many of the barriers to information by providing, at a single point of access, information and advice relating to the working of the whole authority. The role of the one-stop shop in a customer orientated authority is illustrated by Dawson's 1992 survey of one-stop shop provision in England and Wales. Dawson found that the vast majority (75%) of authorities had established a one-stop shop as part of their corporate strategy, which involved reappraising the way in which it relates to and communicates with users (47). Respondents described this strategy in such terms as, " 'customer care/customer first,...closer to the public,...improved accessibility',...'TQM', 'quality', 'customer orientated', and 'improved responsiveness'"(48). Although some respondents cited other reasons for establishing a one-stop shop, none of these were echoed by another authority. This change of emphasis in local authorities is also demonstrated by the example of the London Borough of Brent. In 1991, Brent established a one-stop shop as a 'key service', which "has put the customer at the centre of all activities"(49). Prior to this service, Brent placed little emphasis upon the needs of their customers and characterised their contact with the public as taking place in, "a hostile environment" which led to "confrontational 'them and us' encounters"(50).

1.6   Different types of one-stop shop

The difficulty in analysing the phenomenon of one-stop shops is the variety of provision within the generic concept. This variety even applies to one-stop shops within a single authority, where the same political and management structure is in place and the same level of funding may be allocated. The one-stop shop must be moulded to suit the particular circumstances of the community it serves. Furthermore, with information technology (IT) utilised by one-stop shops developing at such a rapid pace, so the one-stop shop is changing as a consequence. However, one-stop shops can be identified as falling into two broad categorises: one which covers a single organisation and one which includes a number of organisations in partnership.

12

The one-stop shop for a single authority has the clear benefit of making information about the organisation more accessible and of increasing user participation and interaction with the authority. In an article on strategic management in local authorities, Davies argues that one-stop shops should be viewed as offering more than just peripheral benefits to an organisation; "Managing information provision as an authority service rather than a single departmental concern is one of the great strategic challenges for information workers to take on. It can be greatly assisted, as many authorities have found, by shared use of strategically located buildings to create 'one-stop shops'"(51). This is exemplified by Gloucestershire County Council, which in 1991, opened two 'County Information Points'. These were primarily for people, "living and working some distance from Gloucester," whom, market research had shown were "unsure about who organised" their services (52). The County Information Points offered a direct phone line to Shire Hall and a database, with the aim of increasing information about the County Council, its services, and the decision making process (53). Thus, "from one place, people will be able to find out almost all they need to know about the County Council"(54). However, one of the problems inherent in a venture such as the one in Gloucestershire is that, whilst breaking down departmental barriers to information, it does not break down organisational barriers. Its scope will not extend to promoting information relating to, for example, district or town councils or other agencies. In this sense it can only go so far in meeting the information needs of the community and prolongs public confusion about which local authority provides which service.

The one-stop shop for a single authority seems to be better suited for the newly emerging unitary authorities, or London borough councils, in which a single tier of local government exists. This is illustrated by Worrall's article on community information and local authorities, as unitary authorities offer "a different and better integrated portfolio of services overcoming some of the cross-organisational service fragmentation"(55). Yet, it is important to note that even in unitary authorities, the single organisation one-stop shop is limited in its ability to provide information for a community which spans across agencies.

It would be a safe assumption to make that one-stop shops are increasingly incorporating co-operative partnerships between organisations. These may have developed incrementally from the single authority one-stop shop, or as a result of co-operative planning before-hand.

13

This trend towards a more enhanced one-stop shop service is described by McDowell: "The specialisation of information provision has created an environment within which no single organization can satisfy most needs," leading to organisations "progressing from basic awareness and referral liaison to more ambitious forms of joint working"(56). Davies calls for a need to break down traditional boundaries in order to meet the many information requirements of the community: "Ways have to be found of managing across these barriers, of striking new balances and forging new partnerships, not just within local authorities but also outside with other agencies such as community and voluntary groups, the police and health services who are equally active in local communities"(57). Here, the one-stop shop becomes the focus through which a local authority can meet the challenge of what Worrall refers to as its new role as "manager of the local community's information resources"(58).

In 1988, Dover carried out research into public information provision in rural areas. One finding was the necessity of making the information point as comprehensive in its range of services as possible: "it is useless to include only half what people want. To have any credibility the service must be very wide-ranging in its content "(59). As the one-stop shop increases its scope to include a wider range of information, so it becomes more difficult to manage and disseminate that information. As a consequence, local authorities are increasingly looking to IT to make information from all partners as easily accessible as possible. As Worrall argues, the one-stop shop is developing into, "a local network of organisations linked by high speed communications networks"(60). This in turn benefits the user by facilitating, "the democratisation of access to information by allowing greater public access to information"(61). This is highlighted by the example of Hampshire, where one-stop shops provide information about county, district and city council services, as well as general community information. This information is provided at 118 access points, or Local Information Points, each with a networked information system, HANTSNET (62). This system has also been launched onto the Internet, to further increase public access to information. This is a trend which other authorities are following. For example, Surrey Web, which is publicly available in libraries, is a case in point. This aims to provide a "common framework for the integration of public sector organisations, public services, leisure and tourism bodies, business, business support organisations and community groups"(63). These examples show how IT is enabling the one-stop shop to provide

information from a variety of sources in effective ways.

Bellamy (et al) in article about community information systems, suggest that the role of IT in one-stop shops will increase. Indeed, they argue that systems such as HANTSNET are "electronic first-stop shop community information systems"(64). This is distinct from a one-stop shop where "the exchange of information...leads to a completed transaction without direct contact between the customer and the back offices of the bureaucracy." Information systems have the potential to relieve enormous demands on one-stop shop staff permitting, "automation decision-making on customer-entered data, even self-assessment or self diagnosis"(66). Although there are no examples of this type of system to date, it is clear that developments in technology will have the potential to radically alter the one-stop shop concept.

1.7   Public library involvement in one-stop shops

Dawson's survey found that only 11% of local authorities had placed responsibility for their one-stop shops within the library department (67). However, this figure does not seem to take into account that not all local authorities have library service responsibilities. That more libraries are not responsible for one-stop shops may reflect their relatively low profile, compared with other departments. Yet, this still seems a small figure, given that since the 1960s, public libraries have provided community and council information on a broad scale. Many public libraries have also become a major source for council records, following the 1985 Local Government (Access to Information) Act. However, the link between the role of the public library and the role of a one-stop shop is more than just fanciful. Comedia's report into the future of public libraries states that they "provide facilities for citizens to become informed so that they can fully participate in economic, social, political and cultural life" (68); which could equally apply to the rationale for one-stop shops.

As information provision becomes a higher priority for local authorities, developing one-stop shops would appear to offer public libraries a new challenge. This is the case put by Usherwood who, ideally, would like to see libraries encompass "the acquisition, organisation

and communication of information," a role which would "strengthen the librarians' logical and rightful links with other areas such as information technology, one-stop shop information services"(69). In two out of four local authority case studies, Dawson found that no consultation had taken place between the one-stop shop and the library. Dawson describes this as a serious oversight, with "missed opportunities for training and co-operation"(70). In 1995 this point was also expressed by Dina Thorpe, Head of Library Services, East Sussex. While explaining the library's new role in council information dissemination, Thorpe argues that there is "an emphasis on information networks and community information. We are the information experts"(71). Indeed, there is a case for libraries not only to be responsible for one-stop shops, but for one-stop shops to be located within the library itself. The Aslib review of the public library service in England and Wales in 1995 found that about three fifths of the population regularly visits public libraries (72). In addition, as Gyford indicates, libraries "attract a wide cross section of the public"(73) which would give the one-stop shop a strong presence in a community. Another reason offered by Gyford is that libraries are, "considered by their users as 'neutral' places in contrast to the 'hostile' environment of council offices"(74).

The Aslib public library review found that the increasing need to make information accessible was changing both local authority and public expectations about the amount of information held in the public library. "The high level interviews echoed this expectation with repeated references to libraries as one-stop shops for council or other services"(75). Aslib also found evidence that this was changing the library service, to being of central importance to the performance of the local authority. "In the interviews with senior officers and politicians in library authorities, there was a prevailing view that the information role of the public library is an increasingly important factor in the local authority's strategic planning for economic regeneration and development"(76). This move towards incorporation within the central strategy of the local authority is illustrated by the following examples. One Chief Executive in the Aslib case study stated: "Libraries are turning into the hub of the wheel, in that we've got a library strategy...which is bringing out libraries into shopping centres, and putting all the rest of the council services into the library...so in terms of the way the organization's moving forward...then the libraries are actually central to it"(77). In Salford Metropolitan District Council, "the main opportunity and strength of the

public library service for the near future lies in the accumulation and dissemination of community and council information. Through this libraries can continue to improve their position at the centre of local community life"(78). In Hulme, Manchester City Council has recently undertaken an urban regeneration programme, where the library "has been redeveloped as a focus for the community and a symbol of the local authority's investment in people"(79).

If local authorities can benefit by integrating one-stop shop services within the library, this would seem to be an opportunity that libraries can ill-afford to ignore. As the Aslib review states, "for almost all types of organization, innovation in services, procedures and products are essential if they are to survive and prosper"(80). Yet, while Usherwood believes the management and dissemination of local authority information "surely is a strategic role for the public library service,... there are some doubts that it is one for which the profession is fully prepared"(81). These reservations are echoed by Martin, who argues that libraries must break from the mentality "that sees almost any change, and the world about us in general, as a threat to be repelled"(82). In this respect, the example of the Business Link one-stop shops is informative. Hyde, in a study of the development of Business Links, states that in order to avoid duplicating information resources held in the library there is "every incentive to start a meaningful dialogue with their local authority"(83). However, Hyde found that despite Department for Trade and Industry recommendations to forge links with libraries, "many decisions about the format of Business Link and the contribution from the local authority were made before the libraries became involved"(84). Indeed, Hyde discovered that many Business Link staff made no contact with the library and that, "examples are emerging of Business Link information managers approaching public libraries for support but being extended no more than a courteous welcome"(85).

If public libraries are to take the initiative with one-stop shop provision, then greater efforts will be needed to forge partnerships with outside agencies. Currie claims that while "in some parts of Britain there is effective collaboration between public libraries and information and advice services,...this collaboration appears to be very patchy"(86). But, as the Aslib review shows, co-operation is gaining support at a policy making level: "public libraries will need to work with partners from community groups, other public sector bodies and the private

17

sector"(87). Co-operative partnerships should however, present no difficulties to libraries, who Aslib contend, "have successfully practised them for a considerable period"(88). Another factor which suggests public libraries are in a good position to incorporate one-stop shop services relates to IT. The 1997 Department of National Heritage report on the future of pubic libraries argues that, "public libraries can deliver benefits of new technology to a wider population"(89). As the one-stop shop increasingly depends upon new technology to make information publicly accessible, so a symbiotic relationship with public libraries may develop. In 1993, Batt conjectured that within twenty years, "co-operation between libraries and other public sector agencies means that information can be shared and delivered more effectively across a [national information] network"(90).

1.8   Conclusion

The national trend towards one-stop shop provision has stemmed from a greater need for local government to provide accessible information and communication channels to the public. One-stop shops perform an increasingly central role in local authorities. They project a corporate image, raise the profile of public services, provide, from one point, the means for channelling public feedback and help to achieve a more customer orientated emphasis. Such an emphasis has been instrumental in the development of multi-agency one-stop shops which aim to be the focal point for a community's information resources. As the provision of information becomes increasingly significant for local government, the growing involvement of public libraries with one-stop shops appears to be a development which will help to shape the future provision of both services.

The case study which follows will address the provision of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, drawing parallels where appropriate to these developments nationally. Chapter 2 will focus on the factors which have led to the establishment of one-stop shops, and the development of the one-stop shop concept in Buckinghamshire.

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Chapter 2:   The origins and development of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire

2.1   Orientation

Buckinghamshire is a large shire county, located beyond the most northerly reaches of Greater London. According to the 1991 Census, the county is predominantly rural, with approximately 3.5 residents per hectare (excluding Milton Keynes) (1).

As with a number of English counties, Buckinghamshire has undergone changes in the structure of local government as a result of the Local Government Review. In 1995, Milton Keynes, by far the largest urban settlement in Buckinghamshire, was given unitary authority status by Act of Parliament. Throughout the rest of the county three tiers of local government still operate, incorporating county, district and town or parish councils. The county of Buckinghamshire embraces four non-metropolitan district councils; Aylesbury Vale, serving approximately 146,000 people, Chiltern, serving approximately 90,000 people; South Buckinghamshire, serving approximately 62,500 people; and Wycombe, serving approximately 158,000 people (2).

2.2   Information and communication channels prior to one-stop shops

Prior to the one-stop shop initiative, the local authorities of Buckinghamshire, in line with many of their English and Welsh counterparts, placed a low priority upon the provision of information. The example of South Buckinghamshire District Council seems representative of the whole county, where,as described by the Community Liaison Officer, the provision of information was "enough to fulfil our statutory obligations, but not much else"(3). Also, the means by which information was communicated, primarily via local media or poster, reduced its effectiveness by being only one-way, with no measures for feedback. Although public

libraries in Buckinghamshire did provide some council information, funding was not available to make this a comprehensive and distinct service, given the many other library responsibilities. In *The competitive council*, the Audit Commission identified, "effective communication as one of eight key success factors that would mark out the competitive council"(4). Effective communication would require the authority to facilitate feedback and be responsive to the public. In Buckinghamshire, a lack in both the amount and quality of information provided, appears to have created a gulf between local government and the public. In fact, the Department of Environment survey into public perceptions of local government found that knowledge of local authorities was lower for shire counties such as Buckinghamshire, than elsewhere; "In shire districts, there was some confusion as to which tier of local government provided some services"(5).

The dissemination of local authority information was equally minimal in both Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Both employed the traditional methods of communication outlined earlier, with libraries also providing what information they could glean from departments. Perhaps the only significant difference, in comparison with Buckinghamshire was that from the mid-1980s, Cambridgeshire had developed a community information database. This was administered by the library and made available in public libraries, via a view-data terminal (6). The database included a broad range of information, from council services, to various community and voluntary groups, with an address and contact point. However, whilst the database proved useful, it could not by itself make local government appear more transparent to the public.

One significant barrier to effective communication before the emergence of the one-stop shop in Buckinghamshire was the lack of co-operation between and within the three tiers of local government. This was not peculiar to Buckinghamshire alone, as Davies illustrates: "One of the tragedies of modern local government...has been the rigid departmental and professional boundaries within which it has often sought to respond to local needs"(7). This disjointed organisational structure, in which each authority, or even department, sees itself as separate and removed from one another, creates acute problems to members of the public in gaining access to local government. In Buckinghamshire, the only examples where cross-departmental co-operation occurred seem to have been planning, highways and the

24

environment. Yet, this was due more to the nature of the service, which overlapped county and district councils, rather then a desire to make information about the provision of the service more accessible and comprehensible to the public. Indeed, even communicating and creating links with communities was seen as the role for the town/parish council, rather than the concern of every department in every authority. This is illustrated by a Buckinghamshire County Council guide to members, which states the purpose of the town/parish council is taking "a lead within its community" in which, "it is expected to voice the views of the community it represents"(8).

2.3   One-stop shops prior to the Local Government Review

Before the Local Government Review, one-stop shops had been developed in just two locations in Buckinghamshire. In 1992, Wycombe District Council established an Area Office at Princes Risborough, a town located in the north of the Council's region, and in 1993, Buckinghamshire County Council established an Information Centre in the public library in Milton Keynes.

Two general factors would appear to have been significant in the relatively slow progress of one-stop shops in this period. Firstly, the impending Local Government Review affected the development of new services in local authorities, as no-one knew in which form changes would be made. Secondly, whilst local government was undergoing a process which involved becoming more responsive to the public, the speed and extent to which each individual local authority reacted to such challenges differed considerably.

One-stop shop: a customer driven service

The provision of one-stop shops in Princes Risborough and Milton Keynes serves to illustrate how local government in Buckinghamshire was responding to what the Audit Commission referred to as, "the drive towards consumer empowerment"(9). This is demonstrated by the Head of Committees and Members Support, Wycombe District Council, who is responsible

25

for one-stop shops. "Local government has always been good at forming bureaucratic structures, but ultimately this is not enough, as there comes a need to communicate more with the customer"(10). This view is also extended by Harvey, writing on local authority communication: "Somewhat late in the day local government has woken up to the fact that it is doing a lot, generally doing it well and that it should be telling people about it"(11). In 1990, with a new Chief Executive at Wycombe, a new organisational culture was established to attempt to implement this. The Area Office was seen as a pivotal part of the process to change the Council from being "an internal organisation to an external organisation"(12). The Office itself demonstrated this new commitment to open dialogue between the Council and public. The decision to establish the Office came after market research showed that 80% of people in Princes Risborough wanted easier access to the District Council (13).

Whilst market research was not conducted prior to the establishment of the Information Centre in Milton Keynes, the Centre can be seen as very much part of the same trend. The then Chief Executive demonstrated a personal commitment to the project, and funding for the Centre came from the Chief Executive's budget (14). This serves to illustrate how, in the words of the Co-ordinator, "the Information Centre was central to the strategy of the Council", in placing an emphasis upon customer communication (15). Previously, Buckinghamshire had very little 'presence' in Milton Keynes and the Information Centre was seen as the mechanism for publicising the County's services and to making them more accessible and responsive to the people in the city.

Parallels to the situation in Buckinghamshire can be found elsewhere. In 1992, Cambridgeshire County Council established Charterline, a free telephone number for citizens to contact the Council about any issue (16). This was an important aspect of the Council's Citizen's Charter, which sets quality standards of performance and encourages citizen feedback for each service (17). Charterline, located within the Local Government Information Library, in effect performs the function of a one-stop shop. It is the single point of contact for citizens to direct enquiries or problems relating to the whole authority. Even earlier, in 1989, Bedfordshire County Council's 'Community Governance' stressed the importance of citizen participation. "The aim was to develop new ways of relating to local government, both as individuals and collectively"(18). Two policies were pursued in order

to achieve this. One was Community Liaison Forums, in co-operation with parish councils. But it was one-stop shops, or Action Points, which were seen as the flagship service for 'Community Governance'(19). By 1994, Action Points were established in six locations and were a key aspect of the new culture which placed an, "emphasis on customer care, quality assurance, access [and] accountability"(20). These one-stop shops are not "simply outposts of the authority, but a local resource which facilitates 'voice' within communities by encouraging citizens to express their concerns"(21).

Limitations of one-stop shops prior to the Local Government Review

The impetus behind the creation of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire at Princes Risborough and Milton Keynes came from the drive to be more customer orientated. As in the case of both Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, the one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire formed an important part of the authority's aim of 'getting closer to the customer'. But unlike the initiatives in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, which aimed at offering county-wide solutions to the lack of communication provision, the two one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire provided localised solutions.

Before 1993, Buckinghamshire County Council had a low profile in Milton Keynes. As a new town a number of the County Council's services in Milton Keynes came under the jurisdiction of the Development Corporation. When the Corporation was wound up in 1992, the County Council needed a presence in the city to increase peoples' knowledge of its role in providing services. So while the Information Centre aimed to serve the whole of the county, its main priority, as explained by the Co-ordinator, was to make Buckinghamshire County Council known in the city (22). There are similarities with Milton Keynes in the circumstances that led to a one-stop shop, or Area Office in Princes Risborough. Although the Office formed part of a strategic plan to provide facilities throughout Wycombe district, Princes Risborough was singularly identified because of a need to improve the standing of the Council in that particular area. The Head of Committees and Members Support pointed out that Wycombe's main aim was to "achieve a change of opinion" within the north of the district (23). This state of affairs goes back to the 1974 local government reorganisation, in which some powers of town councils were transferred to district councils (24). Whatever

27

their local achievements the one-stop shops in Princes Risborough and Milton Keynes, in practice, had a narrow remit and their restricted focus of interest served as a major limitation in developing a county-wide information service. The circumstances in Buckinghamshire offer a stark contrast to those in Bedfordshire with the development of Action Points. The first Action Point was piloted in 1992. Having, after a three month period, successfully achieved the target requirements, Bedfordshire County Council soon provided Action Points county-wide (25).

Another limitation of pre-Local Government Review one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire was the lack of information provided about any authority other than the one administering the service. In Princes Risborough, the Area Office provides an example of a single authority one-stop shop. The Area Office manager explained that they had had little contact with Buckinghamshire Council Council (26). This also applies to the County Council Information Centre in Milton Keynes. Whilst receiving three months induction for services provided by the County Council, the Centre Co-ordinator had no more than a general reception telephone number for the other local authorities (27). An important aspect of the Information Centre was the development of a community information database, Council On-line Information Network (COIN). But as Buckinghamshire entered the Local Government Review, COIN contained no reference to the district councils (28). The limited scope of information available to the public also applied in Cambridgeshire and initially in Bedfordshire. In Bedfordshire, the Action Points started as single authority one-stop shops, covering exclusively County Council services. However, partnerships with district and parish councils were soon developed as, "we very quickly realised that the public did not differentiate between which local authority provides which service"(29).

2.4   Multi-tier working and the one-stop shop

The effects of the Local Government Review

The Local Government Review has had an enormous impact upon local government in Buckinghamshire as elsewhere. Ball and Stobart explain that the Local Government

Commission for England had an "explicitly stated objective of, wherever possible, creating unitary authorities"(30). With Milton Keynes becoming a unitary authority as of April 1997, the number of residents for whom Buckinghamshire County Council has a responsibility to serve has fallen from approximately 650,000 to 460,000 (31). With this has come a decrease by approximately one third of the total annual budget for the County Council (32). The transferal of staff alone from the County offices in Aylesbury has seen the number of employees in Milton Keynes Council increase from 800 to 5,000 (33). In order to adapt to these changes, the County Council has undergone a process of widespread internal reorganisation.

Arguably of greater significance in Buckinghamshire has been the Commission's insistence upon changes to the culture of local government. This stems from the Commission's remit of creating unitary authorities for the purpose of making local government more accessible to the residents. "Local government based on such areas would improve its image; make more transparent the accountability of local councillors and officers; bring councils closer to the people who elect them;... and be simpler and easier to understand than the present two-tier [three-tier] system"(34). So while the existing structure of local government was maintained throughout the rest of Buckinghamshire, this was on the proviso that the authorities must endeavour to work more closely together. Through collaboration, the Commission argued that local authorities can achieve a more integrated approach to the provision of all local government services (35); or what Coleman refers to as, "seamless services"(36). Thus, theoretically, the same potential benefits of unitary authorities can be achieved by local authorities throughout Buckinghamshire.

Multi-tier working seeks to improve local government by breaking down what the Head of Committees and Members Support, Wycombe District Council, refers to as the, "bureaucratic structures" which engender narrow departmental or single authority approaches to relating to the public (37). So, what can be described as a gradual trend towards a more customer orientated form of local governance before the Review in Buckinghamshire has, since the Review, become a priority. This is illustrated by a recent County Council guide to members which states, "the current emphasis on multi-tier working stems mostly, but not exclusively, from the commitment which the County Council gave to the Local Government

29

Commissioner in seeking to make improvements to local government as a whole, through closer collaboration with our district and parish partners"(38). Although Buckinghamshire County Council had already established an Information Centre, their commitment to multi-tier working would appear to involve a greater degree of organisational change, compared to district or parish councils. The Head of Policy, Cambridgeshire County Council, recently explained how county councils have traditionally distanced themselves from the public, perceiving themselves as a type of Civil Service which formulated policies without communicating them (39). In comparison, district councils have tended to have a higher profile within a community, for example, through council tax collection responsibilities.

There is evidence to suggest that, through multi-tier working, the local authorities in Buckinghamshire are reappraising how services are being developed and provided. In a 1996 document, *The challenge of change*, Buckinghamshire County Council set out the new vision for the Council which will, "inform, consult and listen; respond to individual needs; work with people and our partner organisations in their communities; provide access to effective public services"(40). *The challenge of change* outlines the strategic objectives through which this vision will be realised. The first objective, 'serving people,' will be achieved by taking, "account of people's requirements when planning and delivering services. We will find out what people want and not assume we know best"(41). 'Communicating and consulting' is singled out as another key objective. This identifies the need to, "ensure that everyone with an interest in the work of the County Council is able to contribute to our policy development and service planning. We also want to ensure that the people of Buckinghamshire are aware of the way we take our decisions, the targets we have set and the extent to which we achieve them"(42).

This new culture is also reflected by the district councils, as the example of South Buckinghamshire District Council shows. In 1996, South Buckinghamshire produced a document entitled *Our district, the plan to 2001*, which sets out the Council's short and long term strategic objectives. For the short term, the Council aims to, "promote greater interest in local government within the district, working with the County Council and parish/town councils"(43). This ties in with a longer term strategy to, "encourage the involvement of our community, especially young people, in the Council and in the future of the district"(44).

This aim to be more inclusive is indicative of all the districts in Buckinghamshire. As Chiltern District Council demonstrate, they are all, "committed...to working in partnership with the County Council through *The Challenge of Change* and with town and parish councils"(45). A recurring theme during the interviews conducted for this study was the recognition that a person with a council query was more interested in a speedy solution to the problem than knowing which department or authority held jurisdiction. This is significant in illustrating how local government in Buckinghamshire since the Review has moved in the direction of public responsiveness.

Post-Local Government Review one-stop shops

The multi-tier working emphasis upon communication has created an impetus to extend one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire. This trend can be linked to what Malley describes as the, "Local Government Commission's desire to see the installation of one-stop shops - the availability of information about all local government services under one roof"(46). The importance of one-stop shops is illustrated in *The challenge of change*. Whilst referring to the strategic objective of 'communication and consultation', the document identifies what is, in essence a one-stop shop, as the means through which the objective can be met. "We will seek to work with...organisations in developing joint facilities which will: tell people about the full range of services available in Buckinghamshire; ensure easy access to those services through a network of local information and service points"(47).

Since the Review, Buckinghamshire has seen the development of one-stop shops which deal with public queries across the spectrum of local government. In addition, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire are incorporating a number of non-council related agencies, such as, Citizens Advice Bureaux and Community Health Council. Dawson found that the, "review of the structure of local government has had a profound impact on the development of the one/first stop concept"(48). There is a general tendency towards the one-stop shop becoming the focal point for a community's information requirements. This is illustrated by Buckinghamshire County Council's public information database, now called Community Link to reflect a wider scope of information coverage, including all community organisations. This point is echoed by the manager of the recently established Marlow one-

stop shop: "I see a one-stop shop as being exactly that [the focal point of a community's information requirements]. This goes further than providing just council or tourist information. We want to help people in the town with any type of query, no matter how seemingly small or unrelated"(49). Furthermore, Councillor Oram, who was instrumental in getting the project through Wycombe District Council's committee stage, hopes that the one-stop shop will try to resolve any public query rather than, "sending someone away having been told 'that's nothing to do with us'"(50). The Marlow one-stop shop user survey conducted for this study bears this point out, with information queries spanning the spectrum of local government and community organisations.

The clearest manifestation of multi-tier working in Buckinghamshire to date is the Marlow one-stop shop. This was opened in January 1997, following a collaborative partnership between Wycombe District, the County and Town councils (51). According to the manager, the one-stop shop was established because of local government's need to incorporate the customer perspective, by providing an integrated service which works across established local government lines (52). Also, Councillor Oram echoes a point made in Chapter 1, that as the provision of public services is dispersed across a number of organisations, one-stop shops fulfil the important function of providing an accessible contact point for the public, regarding all services (53).

Indeed, the customer perspective has been canvassed on a wider scale than hitherto, with both Wycombe District and Buckinghamshire County Council commissioning market research into one-stop shops. Work for the latter was conducted by MORI and showed that, "the overwhelming majority (90%) think a one-stop shop for County and other council services would be useful, and four in five said that they would be likely to use it if it was in their nearest town centre"(54). Thus, Marlow became the first one-stop shop in Buckinghamshire to provide an integrated access point for local government. The Office also accommodates the Tourist Information Centre, as well as hosting surgeries for community organisations (55). Whilst the Marlow one-stop shop demonstrates multi-tier working in practice, there is evidence to suggest that the need for a one-stop shop pre-dates the Review. Councillor Oram, for example, believes that the one-stop shop provides the town with a much needed local government presence, and something which was lost after

1974 (56). In this sense, Marlow's one-stop shop correlates to the local circumstances that led to the establishment of an Area Office at Princes Risborough. However, since the Review, Princes Risborough's one-stop shop has increased its scope of information to incorporate multi-tier working. This is confirmed by the manager, who places an emphasis upon "rubbing out the lines between here and Buckinghamshire County Council"(57). The Office has developed to become a multi-agency one-stop shop on the scale of the Marlow Area Information Centre. It hosts a number of community organisation surgeries, as well as providing community and tourist information (58).

In March 1998, Chiltern District Council plan to open a one-stop shop at the Council offices in Amersham (59). As with the Marlow one-stop shop, this initiative stems from a collaboration between the District Council, the County and Town councils (60). It will also become the one public access point needed in the area for communicating with and obtaining information about the whole of local government in Buckinghamshire. Although at present, the one-stop shop is a partnership between local authorities, Chiltern District Council hopes to incorporate a variety of agencies, extending not only to health, voluntary and transport groups, but also to utilities, benefits and business organisations (61). In contrast to Marlow, Princes Risborough and Milton Keynes, the Amersham one-stop shop concept has sprung exclusively from the multi-tier working initiative. This is illustrated by the Assistant Chief Financial Officer, who is overseeing the one-stop project: "The one-stop shop has developed out of the Local Government Review, which showed, through customer surveys, that people wanted easier access to information and made us realise that co-operation between local authorities is vital in the future"(62). This involved customer feedback from the beginning, with a survey of fifty customers showing a favourable response to the one-stop shop project (63). If the Amersham one-stop shop is successful, similar facilities will be provided elsewhere in the Chiltern district.

One-stop shops are by no means the only way through which multi-tier working has manifested itself. The Assistant Chief Financial Officer, Chiltern District Council, referred to, "lots of partnership themes developing between councils"(64). In South Buckinghamshire, the District Council has embraced multi-tier working, whilst having no plans to establish one-stop shops (65). One major partnership initiative is the South

Buckinghamshire Forum. This convenes three or four times a year and brings together representatives from the three tiers of local government, as well as the Health Authority, police and voluntary organisations to discuss potential joint ventures (66). Another example of a multi-tier working initiative is provided by Buckinghamshire County Council. Prior to setting the 1997/1998 budget, the County Council undertook a survey of customers about the planning and delivery of services (67). Rather than undermine the need for a one-stop shop, such schemes are complementary in facilitating multi-tier objectives. As Burns (et al) argue, "high quality information is seen as crucial by those Councils pursuing a citizen's charter approach to citizen empowerment"(68).

Given that one-stop shops can play a key role in achieving the new objectives for local government in Buckinghamshire, it is perhaps surprising that more have not been established. This can be explained by three factors, which will be more fully explored in Chapter 4. Funding would appear to have deterred the growth of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire. The Community Liaison Officer, South Buckinghamshire District Council would ideally like to provide a one-stop shop service, but the necessary funds are not available (69). Another factor would appear to be the extent to which multi-tier working has diffused local government in Buckinghamshire. For example, both Buckinghamshire County Council and Aylesbury Vale District Council are currently considering the establishment of independent one-stop shops in Aylesbury (70). Although each may provide publicly accessible information about their respective organisations, the extent to which either will fully meet the multi-tier objectives is debatable. The length of time that it takes a one-stop shop project to get off the ground can also explain why more one-stop shops have not yet been established in Buckinghamshire. The proposed one-stop shop in Amersham provides a case in point. First mooted during 1996, the one-stop shop is not expected to open until March 1998 at the earliest.

2.5   Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into the factors which led to the establishment of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire and how the one-stop shop has developed as a concept. It

has also addressed the question of the limited number of one-stop shops in the county. Comparisons have been drawn with two other counties.

As has been shown to be the case elsewhere, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire have emerged from the greater emphasis that local government now places upon the provision of easily accessible information and communication channels for the public. In order to better suit the prevailing strategic objectives of local government in Buckinghamshire, one-stop shops have developed to incorporate a number of organisations in partnership. This also reflects a national trend in which one-stop shops are becoming the focus for a community's information requirements.

Having explored the origins and development of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, the next chapter will focus upon how the one-stop shop service is planned and implemented in the county.

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Chapter 3: The planning and implementation of the one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire

3.1 Planning the one-stop shop service

In a rapidly changing environment and with an ever diminishing resource base for public services, it is, argue Kinnell and MacDougall, "essential to set down clear, quantifiable service objectives, within a time-frame. Service priorities will have to be set, with agreed definitions of both the quantity and quality of the services required"(1). Bedfordshire County Council's one-stop shop service has undertaken such activities, within the framework of a marketing plan. This sets out a number of clear objectives, and the strategies by which these objectives will be achieved to a defined standard of service. It also specifies an action plan and procedures for service report and review (2). This approach is also endorsed by Comedia, whilst referring to the public library service, "marketing is not to be confused with simple selling or promotion, but involves a total approach to organisational development and the running of the service"(3). One Bedfordshire Action Point Officer believes that in situations where one-stop shops have failed, it is usually because a marketing approach has not been adopted (4).

The aim of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire is outlined by the 1997 County Council Service Plan for Information Centres. "The aim is to provide the information people want, when they want it, and at accessible locations"(5). The objectives of each participating authority in Buckinghamshire can be characterised as being broad in nature. This is illustrated by the County Council Service Plan, which sets out five priority objectives. The first four can be summarised as aiming to extend the range of information coverage and physical distribution of the Community Link information system. A fifth, broader objective is to, "Co-ordinate Information Centre operational activity throughout the County"(6). The objectives for both Wycombe District Council and Chiltern District Council are to establish, incrementally, one-stop shops in towns across their respective districts (7).

According to Buckinghamshire County Council's Strategic Development Unit, service

planning consists in defining, "a series of specific objectives, or milestones that need to be achieved...objectives should always be SMART, that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-related" (8). But in the case of one-stop shops this approach appears to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Having constructed mainly loose one-stop shop objectives, setting specific and measurable targets has not been a priority. For example, Buckinghamshire County Council has not set targets for increasing the number of Community Link access points throughout the county, or for the range of information covered. Similarly, targets have not been set for establishing future multi-tier one-stop shops with local government partners (9). Although Buckinghamshire County Council aims to achieve as much as possible, targets have not been set because, as the Support Operations Manager points out, they cannot predict what partnership opportunities may arise in the future (10). Likewise, this is very much reflected by Wycombe District's approach to one-stop shop service planning. The Head of Committees and Members Support is an advocate of letting the service evolve with time, having set broad targets within a time-frame (11). This approach has similarities with that of management theorist, Mintzberg, who contends that strategy formation should not only include planning, but also vision and learning: "The 'visionary' approach aims to set broad outlines for a strategy whilst leaving the details to be specified as events unfold. The 'learning' approach allows ideas to emerge within the organisation and to be taken on through adaptation where they are beneficial"(12).

However, given the unpredictable environment within which a one-stop shop service is being implemented, there is a case for a greater degree of planning. Kinnell and MacDougall argue that; "Senior managers must succeed in marketing their services, not only to the public whose custom they hope to attract, but also to politicians who control their finances"(13). If politicians are unclear about the objectives or the tangible means of achieving these, their support may be less forthcoming. Also, as Buckinghamshire has adopted a loose service strategy, documentation and dissemination of the planning process has not been comprehensive. So, while senior staff may be aware of how the one-stop shop service will be implemented, this may not apply to all staff. For example, rather than being given specific objectives to guide their approach, one-stop shop managers operate the service as they see fit (14). This increases the likelihood that staff involved with one-stop shops may not be committed to the same service aims and objectives as senior managers.

As this chapter will go on to demonstrate, all participating authorities in Buckinghamshire have undertaken service planning for one-stop shops. Documenting this process within a plan would ensure the effective management of resources, and enable staff, politicians and customers to know whether the service is meeting its aim. As one local authority Director of Leisure Services explains, planning must include all staff because, "no plan will work unless there is firstly this basic staff support in place"(15).

3.2   Costing

In 1993, the then Secretary of State for the Environment identified one of the three key aspects by which the success of a local authority can be measured as, "the value it squeezes out of each pound of taxpayers' money"(16). Kinnell and MacDougall argue that in such an environment a cost analysis is needed for every service, which can be measurable and accountable (17). This will ensure that the most can be made of a finite amount of resources and that the corresponding efficiency can be clearly demonstrated. Such an approach has been necessary in Buckinghamshire, where the financing of one-stop shops has been a major issue. In Wycombe District Council in 1992, the Chief Executive was very much in favour of the idea of one-stop shops, but less so of the financial implications (18).

Dawson found that the cost of one-stop shops varied enormously. Establishment costs ranged from £1,000 to £300,000, while yearly running costs ranged from £700 to £4,199,570 (19). These discrepancies can be explained primarily by the size and scope of each project. Such findings strike a resonance in Buckinghamshire. Princes Risborough was set up on a 'shoe-string', with no paid member of staff initially. In contrast, the multi-agency Marlow one-stop shop incurred capital costs of £74,500, with annual revenue costs at £107,000 (20). To help justify these costs, Wycombe District have documented annual savings, such as the transfer of staff from High Wycombe. Added value has been included, such as projected savings on bus fares for residents (21). Chiltern District Council are anticipating capital costs to exceed £100,000 for the Amersham one-stop shop. These costs are to be off-set by the immeasurable added value of departmental staff being able to concentrate upon activities

other than enquiries (22). Joint funding has also become a significant factor in meeting the costs of one-stop shops (23). Buckinghamshire County Council are paying for a member of staff and a Community Link terminal in the Marlow and Amersham one-stop shops. Chiltern District Council are also considering other methods of funding for their one-stop shops, such as through sponsorship, or through a private finance initiative (24).

3.3 Responsible department for one-stop shops

As one-stop shops now embrace partnerships across local government in Buckinghamshire, each participating authority has a department with responsibility for such involvement. The issue of control of one-stop shops has been resolved, as Chiltern District Council describes, by one department acting as, "a single point of authority...working on behalf of all sponsoring organisations"(25). Thus, the Public Relations Department of Corporate Affairs, Wycombe District Council, assumes operational responsibility for the Marlow and Princes Risborough one-stop shops (26); while the Finance Department of Chiltern District Council, will assume operational responsibility for the Amersham one-stop shop (27).

As the one local authority with a responsibility for serving the whole county, excluding Milton Keynes, the role of Buckinghamshire County Council in the provision of one-stop shops is crucial. Regardless of whether a district council provides one-stop shops or not, the County Council must ensure that information is disseminated to the public. Here lies the importance of public libraries to Buckinghamshire County Council's strategy for information provision. Through the network of branch libraries, established information and communication channels with the public can be exploited to meet the need for one-stop shops. However, this is a role which the library service has had to lobby for internally rather than the County Council automatically assuming it to be a library function (28). According to the Milton Keynes Information Centre Co-ordinator, the current Head of LIMA played a key role in making sure the library grasped the initiative with the Information Centre project (29). The Head of LIMA was also able to take the opportunities presented by the restructuring of the County Council, to incorporate information into the remit of the library

service (30). Malley describes how the recent Review offered, "an opportunity for libraries to take local authorities by the corporate scruff of the neck and force them to take a long and serious look at the whole process of the communication and exchange of information both within a local authority and between the local authority and the public...it is a chance for information professionals to assert their expertise beyond custodians of packages of information to being information managers in the widest sense"(31). As Buckinghamshire Library Service Plan outlines, one priority objective for 1997/1998 is, "to take a major role in management of information on Council services in the County"(32).

According to the Head of LIMA, one-stop shops based within the library service form part of a process which will see public libraries as the major information provider of the future (33). The key to this process lies in forging partnerships with outside agencies, echoing Aslib's findings. For example, a regional Business Link has recently opened in the County Reference Library, following a successful bid by LIMA. Whilst the Head of LIMA acknowledges that the Chambers of Commerce are right to claim to be the business information experts, it is the library service which is best able to manage and disseminate such information effectively (34). This also applies to one-stop shops, which the Head of LIMA argues has been a traditional reference library activity. With the current trend towards one-stop shop provision, he argues there is a danger that public libraries will be by-passed, as has been the case with a number of Business Links. So, if public libraries are not responsive to partnership opportunities, the Head of LIMA believes they may well be giving away their core functions (35). To illustrate this, an example was given of how Buckinghamshire's library service had missed an opportunity of teaming up with the Tourist Board to become the major source for tourist information in the county. This was due to a library reluctance to perform tasks such as hotel reservations (36).

Cambridgeshire County Council's library service has also seized the initiative for providing council and community information. Charterline falls under the responsibility of the library service, whilst public libraries have a community information database with a direct fax machine to County Council departments (37). In Bedfordshire, the County Council provides an interesting comparison to the situation in Buckinghamshire County Council. Initially, Action Points were located and administered within public libraries. However, the initiative

was lost in 1994,when responsibilities were transferred to Corporate Services because the levels of advocacy employed by the Action Points caused friction with the traditional information providing role of the library service(38).

3.4   Market research

Dawson found that a majority of local authority respondents (55%) had carried out some form of market research for their venture into one-stop shops (39). As illustrated in the previous chapter, with the exception of Milton Keynes, customer surveys were undertaken to identify the level of support for one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire. This contrasts with Bedfordshire, where the County Council did not undertake a survey prior to the initiation of the service, although five have subsequently been carried out (40). In addition, the local authorities currently involved with one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, and Chiltern District Council in particular, have investigated the provision of one-stop shops elsewhere (41).

Kinnell and MacDougall argue that accurate market segmentation is required in order to set service priorities and to maximise limited resources (42). An example of segmentation, or in this case, community profiling, is provided by the manager of the Princes Risborough Area Office. Having identified that more than a quarter of residents were over 65 years of age, a large part of the service was geared towards this clientele. To help meet the information needs of this and other groups, links with the Community Health Council and Buckinghamshire Disability Information Network were established (43). In Marlow, the one-stop shop manager has identified a lack of information and activities for young people in the area. To exploit this situation, the manager is negotiating with the regional Youth Centre and Youth Enquiry Service to use the one-stop shop as a base in Marlow (44). Furthermore, with Buckinghamshire being largely rural, the County Council has placed a priority on establishing Information Points in smaller towns and villages, where access to information is currently limited (45). In Bedfordshire, the County Council Action Point service has undertaken market segmentation as part of its marketing plan. This has enabled them to target services to different parts of the community, at times when clients are most likely to use Action Points, such as Saturday morning openings for commuting workers (46).

44

3.5   Location

With the aim of making council and community information accessible to the public, the location of a one-stop shop is crucial. As Kinnell and MacDougall identify: "However well developed, priced and promoted the service is, if customers are unable to get to it or cannot easily find it, all this work is jeopardized"(47). This is further illustrated by Dawson's study of Lancashire County Council's one-stop shops. Because many were located in bus stations, it was very difficult for the service to target customers other than those requiring bus information (48).

As Chapter 1 showed, the case for locating one-stop shops in public libraries is strong. This is reinforced by the Head of LIMA, who emphasises that the biggest selling point for public libraries is the number of people who use them. In Buckinghamshire alone for the 1996/97 year, 6.5 million people visited a public library (49). Such numbers clearly demonstrate the public accessibility of libraries. Another major benefit of locating one-stop shops within public libraries is that the necessary infrastructure is already in place. Not only can libraries offer benefits such as IT connections, they are very often located in the centre of a community, thus ensuring ease of access. In this sense, the Head of LIMA believes that public libraries offer a cost-effective solution to the problem of information provision (50). In Marlow, the annual rental costs for the one-stop shop building is approximately twice that of the nearby public library. Although the location was agreed before LIMA assumed County Council responsibility for one-stop shops, the Head of LIMA believes that had it been located in the library, these finances could be more wisely directed towards acquiring information resources (51). Although Princes Risborough also has a High Street location, the Head of Committees and Members Support, Wycombe District Council does acknowledge the potential of public libraries as one-stop shops. Wycombe District Council is currently collaborating with LIMA to provide a new public library/one-stop shop in High Wycombe (52). As "libraries are very often the first port of call" for information seekers, ventures such as this avoid unnecessary duplication (53). This is also recognised by Cambridgeshire County Council, which along with Fenland District Council, hopes to take advantage of the provision of a new public library in March, to incorporate a local government information access point (54).

45

Although public libraries can provide convenient one-stop shop locations, the Head of LIMA stresses that they should not be viewed as the sole location (55). This approach is important in enabling LIMA to identify opportunities for extending one-stop shops when they arise. For example, in the village of Denham, which has no library, LIMA is collaborating with South Buckinghamshire District Council to provide an Information Point in the newly refurbished Parish Hall (56). In Amersham, the one-stop shop location is to be the District Council reception area. This was seen as the ideal location because of the high number of public enquiries they receive. Furthermore, this location is situated close to County and Town Council offices, the Housing Association, health centre and police station, all of which, it is believed will contribute to additional custom (57).

Another consideration in the location and setting of one-stop shops is the ambience and atmosphere. Gyford describes how Westminster Borough Council's one-stop shop helps put the customer at ease by, "the carpets, the background music, the indoor landscaping, the open counters and the furnishings" (58). In Buckinghamshire, all one-stop shops acknowledge how the image they project can, as Kinnell and MacDougall illustrate, "radically affect the attitudes and subsequent behaviour of the users"(59). For example, Chiltern District Council has gone to great expense to redesign their reception area. This will include comfortable seating, a childrens' area, vending machine, as well as private interview rooms for customer confidentiality (60).

3.6   Staffing

Staff are a key element to the performance of any information service. As Abell illustrates within the context of Business Link, "the response to the first time enquirer, whether by phone or personal visit, will determine whether they follow through with the enquiry and whether they become committed Business Links clients"(61). The role of staff in one-stop shops is well recognised by local authorities in Buckinghamshire. The manager of Princes Risborough's one-stop shop believes staff responsiveness is crucial because, "the staff are your service"(62). The manager extends this by noting that staff need to be able to acquire a

46

wide range of information and to present this clearly to customers (63). Another necessary attribute for one-stop shop staff in Buckinghamshire is having a friendly and personable approach, referred to as customer care skills.

The suitability of public libraries as the location for one-stop shops again seems appropriate in this context. As the Head of LIMA argues, public libraries have been committed to customer care long before this became fashionable in local government (64). This view is underlined by a member of Cambridgeshire's Charterline staff, who claims that as part of the library service, staff are already committed to seeing information queries through to a successful outcome (65). Furthermore, public libraries have a good record for referring queries where necessary, which Dawson identifies as a problem for one-stop shops with no public library involvement (66). Also of value to one-stop shops are the information skills of professional librarians. This is of increasing importance as one-stop shops include more partners, broadening the information coverage. The Princes Risborough manager questions the extent to which an Information Assistant, paid on the lowest clerical wage, should be expected to meet such demands (67). In this respect, Bedfordshire's Action Points only employ professional staff, who are qualified to provide advice and information across a broad spectrum (68). Yet, as responsibility is reflected by salary, this again links back to the Head of LIMA's assertion that public libraries provide a cost-effective infrastructure.

Training of one-stop shop staff is also acknowledged by Buckinghamshire authorities as playing a vital part in the performance of the service. For Amersham's one-stop shop, the Assistant Chief Financial Officer believes that all staff will need three months of induction across local government, supplemented thereafter by continuous staff development programmes (69). Wycombe District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council co-operate in the provision of training and staff development, which includes inter-authority training and familiarisation programmes. Marlow's one-stop shop manager believes this enhances the service provided by helping staff from across the tiers become personally known to each other (70). Aslib identifies that this fulfils two of four levels of integration needed for successful partnerships: operational and interpersonal (71). However, the County Information Centre Co-ordinator did not receive a formal induction programme (72), which Dawson argues is essential for staff to understand the complexity of an authority and to help

47

make contacts within departments (73).

3.7 Information technology

IT is central to the one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire, and looks set to alter the future direction of the service. IT allows the public to communicate with one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire, through a variety of channels: telephone, fax and e-mail. One-stop shop video links through to council departments allows the public to resolve remotely a council related issue. Equally important is the role of IT in enabling one-stop shops to communicate with, and to receive information from, colleagues across local government. For example, one-stop shops such as the one in Marlow have utilised IT to gain access to departmental records held on database (74). Technology has been instrumental in increasing the amount and quality of information provided to the public as well as allowing greater access to that information. As Dover explains, "information technology is now too valuable a tool to ignore when ...it can be so useful as a community resource"(75).

For Buckinghamshire County Council, IT is seen as the key to achieving their one-stop shop strategy. The Head of LIMA believes that the Internet will enable council and community information to become far more accessible to the public, at a greatly reduced cost than is currently possible (76). LIMA has recently installed a Web-site for the County Council, including the Community Link database (77). The Internet also has the benefit of providing links to other relevant sites, particularly other local authorities and health authorities. With IT developments such as the Internet, and with council tax and rental transactions increasingly performed by direct debit, the manager of Princes Risborough's one-stop shop believes the future of the service will be bound indelibly to that of the library service (78). Indeed, LIMA are expecting to provide public access to the Internet in libraries county-wide during the next two or three years (79). The opportunities offered by the Internet to one-stop shops is endorsed by LIMA's Support Operations Manager, who believes one-stop shops will soon provide regularly updated 'What's on?' information, plus facilities for booking cinema tickets or hotel rooms (80). This is similar to Cambridgeshire County Council's approach to providing public information. For example, *Cambridge on-line* is a Web-site developed by

all tiers of local government, containing council and community information. Like Buckinghamshire County Council, Cambridgeshire's Head of Policy aims to develop this resource further with partners and to increase public access to it, via public libraries and council offices (81).

Although Princes Risborough's one-stop shop manager sees IT developments as cost-effective as well as adding value to the service, they are not without their limitations. From her experience, providing information through personable contact with the customer has been the greatest asset of the one-stop shop service (82). Baskerville and Smithson echo this caution about IT driven change, where, "face to face relationships are replaced with impersonal communication through the use of computer mediated communication"(83). This view is also reflected by Bedfordshire's Action Points, in which IT plays a peripheral role. An Action Point Officer explained how many people who use their service, such as the elderly and disabled, do not know how to use IT for their information needs and are likely to resist any attempt to introduce IT (84). Furthermore, Harris argues there is a danger that information systems may fail to meet all the information requirements of a community, by only including easily categorised information sources (85). Therefore, the successful utilisation of IT as an information delivery mechanism depends greatly upon the management skills of the one-stop shop.

3.8   Promotion

Each local authority in Buckinghamshire has considered it necessary to promote their one-stop shop service. Kinnell and MacDougall divide promotional targeting into non-personal and personal activities (86). Non-personal activities such as local press releases, leaflets, posters and welcome packs to new residents have all been used to promote the service. The Marlow Office has also targeted certain groups by, for example, including features in Help the Aged newsletters (87). In addition, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire clearly benefit from being a visible community landmark, reflecting a wider aim to project a positive image of local government. By comparison, Cambridgeshire's Charterline is primarily a telephone service and as a consequence lacks a visible community presence. This has made it more

difficult to raise public awareness about the service, despite undertaking a number of non-personal promotional activities (88).

In Buckinghamshire, personal promotional activities have also been employed, as illustrated by their priority on customer care. For example, Marlow's one-stop shop opening included a Santa's grotto to coincide with the Christmas lights festival, and the opportunity to discuss the service with staff on an informal basis (89). A survey conducted in Marlow for this study suggests that users of the service have a good knowledge of the range of information covered in the one-stop shop. Of the eleven respondents who lived locally, seven were aware of all services, while four knew of some of the services on offer.

3.9   Performance evaluation and review

Aslib's review of public libraries suggests that performance should be measured by, "the development of locally constructed models which fully incorporate the expertise of professional managers and are also shaped by the experience of users"(90). Usherwood believes that the evaluation process must include the input of professional staff because users alone cannot be expected to be fully able to evaluate service performance (91). In Buckinghamshire, one-stop shops are evaluated through the collection of statistical records by which performance can be gauged. For example, Marlow one-stop shop breaks down customer enquiries by authority, department and also by volume (92). Community Link generates statistics of the types of information requested and where the system is accessed (93).

Usherwood, however, argues that "statistics are just a small part of the reality...and any meaningful evaluation has to go beyond simplistic quantification"(94). Yet, as the Head of Committees and Members Support, Wycombe District Council observes, 'quality measures' are much more difficult to construct (95). In Buckinghamshire, these have focussed primarily upon customer feedback. For instance, Community Link and Wycombe District's one-stop shops utilise customer comment forms, although Princes Risborough's manager acknowledges that other types of customer feedback is required (96). Chiltern District

50

Council aim to, "monitor customer satisfaction by carrying out an exit survey"(97). In addition, waiting times will be monitored to prescribed limits, as well as feedback from council departments on specific cases (98).

One of the difficulties in reviewing one-stop shop performance in Buckinghamshire is in the extent to which the evaluation process has been comprehensive. In Buckinghamshire, specific targets for performance have been set for the number of enquiries handled by one-stop shops. Amersham one-stop shop has also set a target for the number of enquiries to be answered immediately (99). Yet, such targets alone make it difficult to assess the overall standard of performance. Indeed, the County Council has not currently set targets for one-stop shop performance, although *The challenge of change* identifies the need for setting service targets within which performance can be measured (100). Through *The challenge of change*, Buckinghamshire County Council hopes to achieve its strategic objective of 'serving people' by, "setting quality standards for each service, telling people what they are and letting them know how well we achieve them"(101). This not only benefits the customer, but will also enable managers to be in a better position to review performance. Kinnell and MacDougall argue that quality standards must be measurable in order to allow managers to, "ask fundamental questions about their services: Are we achieving our objective? Where can we improve? How can we improve?"(102) Or, as outlined in *The challenge of change*, to "revise original performance targets and make sure they remain relevant"(103).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of a service plan which sets clear objectives and defines performance standards. Although it has been shown that a great deal of planning has been carried out in Buckinghamshire, the one-stop shop service has not adopted this approach, having set generally broad objectives. This chapter has also shown how convergence between public libraries and one-stop shops provides benefits for both services in Buckinghamshire, in terms of adding value and by providing a cost-effective service. Whilst IT can greatly enhance the delivery of information by one-stop shops, this very much depends upon how it is utilised and managed.

It is evident from the ground covered in Chapters 2 and 3 that there is a political dimension to the provision of a one-stop shop service in Buckinghamshire. Such political factors operate at different levels in Buckinghamshire - both within and between local authorities. One-stop shops have also been affected by the local and national political environment. It is this political environment which will be addressed in the next chapter.

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Chapter 4: The political environment within which one-stop shops operate in Buckinghamshire

4.1 Co-operation and communication between local authorities

Whilst local government in Buckinghamshire is committed to achieving multi-tier objectives, each authority has its own political and managerial structure, in which methods for achieving these objectives may differ. This makes it difficult to achieve a consistent level of one-stop shop service throughout the county. For example, in South Buckinghamshire District Council, the prevailing view amongst members is that the Council is doing a good job and has a good relationship with the public. Consequently, funding or the use of staff time will not be sanctioned for improving the image of the Council, or to increase the level of communication and information provision with and to the public (1). Even where there is a degree of synergy between County and district councils in relation to one-stop shops, differences may emerge about either general or specific aspects of the service. For example, as discussed, the Head of LIMA believes the best location for Marlow's one-stop shop to be in the public library. Yet Wycombe District's Councillor Oram believes the current location is ideal and does not equate public libraries with council or community information provision (2). Other aspects of the service, such as the qualifications and skills of staff, or the provision of staff training may differ between partners. This increases the likelihood of customers receiving different levels of one-stop shop service according to where they live in Buckinghamshire.

Co-operation between local authorities in Buckinghamshire was hindered by the Local Government Review. District councils aspired to become unitary authorities, putting themselves at odds with the County Council (3). Councillor Oram believes that for officers and members across the tiers relations were soured, even between members of the same political party (4). As the Review took approximately two years to reach a conclusion, this lack of co-operation greatly affected the ability of one-stop shops to provide public information for the whole of local government. For example, for a period during the Review,

57

references to district councils were taken off the COIN database because except for South Buckinghamshire the districts were unwilling to contribute financially to COIN (5).

Both one-stop shops in Milton Keynes and Princes Risborough developed from an emphasis upon customer responsiveness. Yet, given their timing in relation to the Review, they might also be interpreted as acts of expediency by the respective authorities. Cambridgeshire County Council's Head of Policy believes that the Review heralded an exceptional period for local government. "Things were done by local authorities during the Review that would not under normal circumstances have occurred"(6). An interviewee in Buckinghamshire speculated as to whether the establishment of the Princes Risborough Office might have been influenced by political motives. Through the success of the Office in communicating with the public, the District Council could demonstrate to the Commission its potential to govern the area as a single authority. Also, with Milton Keynes presenting a strong case for unitary authority status, it is possible that the County Council hoped the success of its Information Centre would, in turn, alleviate the likelihood of this occurring.

Since the Review, relations between local authorities in Buckinghamshire has improved markedly. Yet, as Wycombe District Council's Head of Committees and Members Support estimates, it may take up to two years before relations between District and County members are fully restored (7). The improvements in the levels of communication and co-operation between local authorities reflects the new emphasis upon multi-tier working. Through this new culture the one-stop shop service has benefited from a growth in scope and coverage of information to include local authorities in partnership. Multi-tier working has enabled, as Aslib identify, strategic integration between heads of service and tactical integration between service professionals to occur in one-stop shops (8). The importance of this is highlighted by Usherwood: "good continuous communication is a way of avoiding the misunderstandings that can seriously damage an organization's internal and external relationships. The success or failure of such communication depends to a large extent on the attitudes of management"(9). Indeed, if the user survey carried out in Marlow for this study acts as an indicator, customer satisfaction with multi-tier one-stop shops is in evidence. Of the thirteen respondents who sought specific information, all were pleased with the way their query was handled and with the outcome. Where one-stop shops have not yet developed in

Buckinghamshire, the various levels of integration that Aslib believe necessary for successful partnerships are not yet in place. This reflects the fact that multi-tier working objectives have been in place for less than two years. As yet, not all local government staff are translating these objectives, "into practical steps that will deliver tangible benefits"(10).

Co-operation and communication between local authorities in Buckinghamshire has also been affected by the extent to which each authority has developed IT capabilities. The previous chapter identified the importance of IT and the future potential of the Internet for one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire. However, Buckinghamshire County Council is currently the only authority to have exploited the Internet as a public information resource in the county (11). Efforts have recently been made to demonstrate the potential of this resource in providing co-ordinated local government information to the public (12). Although the districts are aware of the possibilities of the Internet, it will be some time before these are realised. As Chiltern District Council illustrate, "we do not have any true information systems in place yet. All this can be overcome but will take a while and as yet, is not featured in our IT Strategy"(13). Until this occurs, the management of information held on Community Link will be undertaken solely by the County Council Co-ordinator, which increases the possibility of information losing currency. Also, as LIMA's Support Operations Manager illustrates, using IT as a mode of communication is limited unless all local authorities can use a common platform. For example, to date only Buckinghamshire County Council and Chiltern District Council can communicate via e-mail (14). Furthermore, the location of Princes Risborough's one-stop shop has created technical difficulties in the extent to which IT links can be established (15).

4.2   Co-operation and communication within local authorities

The Local Government Review has, certainly in the short term, had a detrimental effect on internal communication within Buckinghamshire County Council (16). Much of this can be explained by the Council having to, "face some of the most challenging changes in the history of Buckinghamshire" (17) in which, "the downsizing required to achieve the transfer of responsibilities to the new Milton Keynes Council has been a difficult, and sometimes

painful, process for all those involved"(18). This process has seen many staff leave the County Council, with remaining staff often changing position and responsibilities, as well as physical location and telephone number (19). Such a state of flux has adversely affected the internal communications process. Consequently the task of the Information Centre Co-ordinator to disseminate County Council information to the public via Community Link and one-stop shop colleagues has proved trying and difficult (20). Once the County Council moves out of this transitory phase, and with the number of directorates being reduced from thirteen to five, internal communication should benefit from the outcomes of the Review (21). This organisational structure will facilitate closer working between staff than was previously the case.

Of greater significance has been local authority departmental reluctance to co-operate with the provision of one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire. Internal resistance to one-stop shops has been experienced by each participating authority. This can partly be explained by staff feeling threatened by the one-stop shop initiative. An obvious example of this relates to the position of current reception staff at Chiltern District Council. The Assistant Chief Financial Officer recognises the need for change because the remit of the current reception area, to act as the first point of contact with the public falls short of the one-stop shop aim of being the single point of contact (22). This, however, has a negative effect on the morale of staff. Furthermore, staff anxiety extends beyond the reception staff. This is due to a feeling that their role will be undermined to a degree, as one-stop shops are called upon to resolve public enquiries formerly undertaken by departmental staff. The Assistant Chief Financial Officer believes that communication and feedback will be the key to overcoming this resistance. The one-stop shop, "will have to provide added value and when it does, it will be easier to 'win over' the professional staff in other departments"(23).

Another form of internal resistance to one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire stems from the narrow departmental loyalties held within parts of local government. For example, the Community Liaison Officer, South Buckinghamshire District Council believes there is generally departmental reluctance to co-operate and work across boundaries. She argues that greater communication is necessary to break down departmental barriers, a process which is not made easy when, for example, the internal telephone directory contains only surnames of

colleagues (24). With the persistence of rigid departmental perspectives, the task of a customer orientated one-stop shop is made all the more difficult. For example in Chiltern District Council, the Assistant Chief Financial Officer was asked by a head of another department whether the one-stop shop was an attempt to take away the powers of his department (25). Also, the projected County Council one-stop shop in Aylesbury is to be solely undertaken by the Corporate Services Department. Although the Head of LIMA has attempted to become involved in the project, he is concerned not to interfere with relations by crossing established departmental boundaries (26). Bedfordshire County Council has also experienced departmental resistance to co-operation at an organisational level. As in Buckinghamshire, this has created a conflict with Action Points whose aim is to work across established lines for the benefit of customers. An Action Point Officer believes that although the situation is now changing, it took a long time before the support of departments was forthcoming (27).

Another factor affecting the environment within which one-stop shops operate in Buckinghamshire is the tendering out of some local government services. This development has led to certain services in Buckinghamshire being administered by private contractors. While Chiltern District Council believes this does not necessarily cause problems for one-stop shops, it does make a corporate initiative such as one-stop shops more difficult to co-ordinate (28). As a contractor's concern may stretch no further than the service it runs, co-operation on a corporate level may be difficult to achieve. As Usherwood argues, "co-operation is rarely part of the private sector culture"(29). In Chiltern District Council, one contractor refused to help finance a central telephone switchboard because it had installed a direct telephone for its own service (30). This reflects Usherwood's findings, "In one authority it was already found 'much more difficult to work with other...departments now they have been contracted out'"(31). Paradoxically, while contracting out may present difficulties for one-stop shops, as is shown in Chapter 1, it has formed part of a trend in local government which has led to the development of one-stop shops.

4.3 Political involvement in one-stop shops

One-stop shops in Buckinghamshire have generally received support from all three major political parties. Cross-party support would appear to be strongest from county councillors, no doubt reflecting the current emphasis upon multi-tier working. Political support for the Marlow one-stop shop is, however, slightly more problematical. Marlow's one-stop shop was steered through the committee stage with the backing of the ruling Liberal-Democrat - Labour alliance. Although the Conservative group agree in principle with one-stop shops, they opposed the Marlow venture because of the financial costs involved (32). Herein lies the greatest political threat to one-stop shops. As Councillor Oram illustrates, an incoming group with a budget-cutting agenda could feasibly terminate the one-stop shop service (33). To reduce the risk of this happening to one-stop shops, effective management skills of those responsible for the service are imperative. This is argued by Usherwood, within the context of public libraries. "Politics is important to the effective management of libraries because the public librarian, like any other local government officer, is operating in a political - some respondents argued, an increasingly political - environment"(34).

The environment within which one-stop shops operate in Buckinghamshire is also greatly influenced by national politics. As has already been discussed, central government initiatives have played a significant role in the establishment of local authority one-stop shops. Kinnell Evans highlights the impact of national politics upon local authority services, with reference to public library managers, whose, "services are under attack from centralist political pressures whilst they negotiate with and ultimately defer in policy matters to their local authority elected representatives, the members of councils, whose allegiances are conditioned by national party political considerations"(35). Each of the three county councils under investigation are currently experiencing significant budgetary restraints, caused by a combination of budget capping and the outcomes of the Review. This is graphically illustrated by Bedfordshire County Council's most recent budget, which has resulted in the loss of 40% of Council employees (36). So while there exists both local and national pressures to increase public information through the establishment of one-stop shops, central government measures to curtail local government spending makes this increasingly difficult.

Part of the rationale for the capping of local government spending is to encourage local authorities to focus on internal efficiency savings. As far as this is concerned, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire have, to varying degrees, been viewed not as a new service operating in conjunction with other services, but as part of a re-configuration of existing services within a local authority. So, for example, efficiency gains will be achieved in Amersham and Aylesbury by one-stop shops eliminating the need for departmental receptions areas. Yet, efficiency gains alone would appear unlikely to realise local government's need for improving communication and information provision throughout Buckinghamshire. Hence, in Marlow, as well as in future one-stop shop sites such as Chesham, where local government presence is minimal, a certain amount of capital investment is necessary. With local government in Buckinghamshire, particularly the County Council, experiencing financial constraints, funding for one-stop shops is likely to remain scarce (37). This situation is paralleled by that in Cambridgeshire County Council. As the Head of Policy explains, if Cambridgeshire were to employ two one-stop shop staff, this would equate to the politically unviable option of two less teachers or social workers (38).

The shortage of funding for local government services has been the major factor influencing the way in which LIMA has approached the establishment of one-stop shops. As the Head of LIMA currently faces annual service cuts of 2%, funding for one-stop shops is expected to remain a low priority for the foreseeable future (39). In terms of the allocation of resources across County Council services, one-stop shops will not be able to, "compete with the 'teacher argument'"(40). Within this political climate it would appear that in Buckinghamshire, one-stop shops need public libraries as much as public libraries need one-stop shops. By comparison, Bedfordshire's Action Points, which are not affiliated to public libraries, have recently suffered severe financial cuts. In the last three years the service has been reduced from twelve staff operating six Action Points, to three staff operating three Action Points (41). An Action Point Officer recently doubted that the service would survive the next budget (42).

4.4   Conclusion

One-stop shops have been greatly affected by the political environment, both within and between local authorities in Buckinghamshire. This stems largely from the difficulties caused by the process of Local Government Review, as well as adjusting to its outcomes. Although one-stop shops have benefited from greater levels of co-operation since the Review, the future development of this service will require multi-tier working objectives to be comprehensively applied by staff throughout local government in Buckinghamshire. Also, the ability of IT to deliver information in one-stop shops will be limited until all local authorities in Buckinghamshire have the same IT capabilities.

Political pressures, both locally and nationally, have proved significant in forming the environment within which one-stop shops operate in Buckinghamshire. This has required one-stop shops to reconcile a growing need to provide local government and community information with fewer resources with which to achieve this.

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Chapter 5:   Conclusion

The many changes recently experienced by local government has impacted upon Buckinghamshire as much as elsewhere. These changes have led to an increasing need to communicate with and to provide information for the public. As is the case nationally, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire consequently fulfil some core functions in local government. They provide a single point for channelling public feedback, project a corporate identity, and raise the profile of local government and the services it provides. One-stop shops are also a significant means by which local government can realise its newly found aim of becoming more customer orientated. Chapter 2 demonstrated how in Buckinghamshire, as elsewhere, this emphasis has seen the development of one-stop shops encompassing local government and community organisations in partnership, to become the focal point for a community's information requirements. As information assumes greater significance, and with the prospect of larger, regionalised local government authorities on the horizon, the functions of one-stop shops would appear to become of even greater relevance.

As illustrated in Chapter 3, one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire are increasingly utilising IT to enable information spanning a multiplicity of agencies to be disseminated effectively to the public. Yet, an over-reliance upon IT alone as an information delivery mechanism would appear to be problematic. As has been shown in Buckinghamshire, one of the great benefits of one-stop shops is that they provide the public with a personable contact with local government, an organisation which has traditionally been viewed as overly bureaucratic and and impersonal. Although community information systems are developing at a rapid rate, their ability, at least for the present, to meet all the information needs of a community is debatable. Current research, as being undertaken by Batt for example, is focussing on the future prospects rather than present potential of community information systems to, "enrich the lives and opportunities of citizens"(1).

Chapter 3 has also demonstrated that convergence between one-stop shops and public libraries in Buckinghamshire is occurring, offering benefits to both services. As public libraries look set to play a key role in making new IT accessible to the public, this presents

partnership opportunities with one-stop shops, which aims to increase its provision of information through IT. Convergence with public libraries is also facilitated by libraries having a good tradition of co-operating with partners, a key theme for its future development. The Buckinghamshire case study also demonstrates how public libraries can often provide suitable locations for one-stop shops. Furthermore, the library function of helping the public to meet their information needs looks unlikely to diminish. Buckinghamshire parallels a developing trend nationally in which public libraries offer local government the means by which information can be disseminated cost-effectively to the public at large. This is of increasing importance in an environment in which the growing need to provide public information must be met with an ever greater scarcity of resources. However, this has by no means been recognised by local authorities across all of England and Wales. For example, in Bedfordshire, where one-stop shops have been established at considerable financial cost with no current library involvement, there is a strong possibility that the service will be terminated. Such an outcome will put local government in Bedfordshire at a significant disadvantage in meeting the growing need to provide accessible information and communication channels to the public.

It has been shown in Chapter 3 that local authorities in Buckinghamshire have undertaken a great deal of service planning for one-stop shops. Whilst such planning appears to have put one-stop shops in a good position to meet the information needs of the public within the allotted funding, this would be more effectively achieved by setting clear, quantifiable targets within a specified time-frame. This would also better enable one-stop shops to negotiate the prevailing political environment within which they operate, as illustrated in Chapter 4. Although LIMA has identified convergence as the key to future one-stop shop provision, this may not necessarily coincide with their district partners, two of which have considerably greater levels of funding for one-stop shops, thereby making a consistent level of service throughout the county difficult to achieve. Chapter 4 also demonstrated how the growth of multi-agency one-stop shops in Buckinghamshire has been impeded by the extent to which multi-tier corporate objectives have been accepted by staff throughout local government, and put into practice. This lack of co-operation between the whole of local government, both within and between authorities, has also adversely affected one-stop shops ability to provide comprehensive local government information, although this has greatly improved since the

Local Government Review. Despite these difficulties and teething problems, the one-stop shop concept has become firmly embedded in the local authority landscape in Buckinghamshire, and one-stop shops supported by new IT, through co-operation with public libraries, offers pointers not only to the future direction of information provision and communication flow with the public in Buckinghamshire, but in other counties as well.

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Appendix 1: Interview outline

Interviews were conducted with staff responsible for the formulation of one-stop shop policy in Buckinghamshire County Council, Chiltern District Council, Wycombe District Council, Bedfordshire County Council and Cambridgeshire County Council.

Areas covered during interviews included:

      why the one-stop shop service was established;

      the aims of the service;

      how the service fits into the strategies of the department and organisation;

      the process of service planning undertaken;

      the process of performance evaluation and review undertaken;

      the role of IT;

      levels of funding available for the service - capital and revenue;

      staffing, induction and training;

      levels of promotion and publicity undertaken;

      the effects of Local Government Review and the political environment;

      partnerships with local authorities and community organisations.

Interviews were also conducted with managers of one-stop shops in the respective local authorities.

Areas covered during interviews included:

      why the one-stop shop service was established;

      the aims of the service;

      how the service fits into the strategies of the department and organisation;

      links with community organisations;

      operational aspects: opening times, levels of staffing, customer feedback and redress, provision of information, referral of enquiries, role of IT;

      effects of the Local Government Review and the political environment.

Appendix 2:   Marlow one-stop shop user survey

An exit survey of users was deemed the most appropriate method of data collection for the customer perspective, in light of the low response rate of one-stop shop customers to a user questionnaire adopted for Dawson's PhD thesis; *An investigation into local authority information centres or one-stop shops*.

The purpose of the user survey was to gain qualitative primary data by asking a series of open-ended questions regarding:

> user knowledge of the services provided by the one-stop shop;
>
> user experience of the one-stop shop service;
>
> user expectation of the one-stop shop service.

1. How far have you travelled to come to the Information Centre?

2. What information or advice did you seek?

3. Was the Information Centre able to provide the information or advice you sought?

4a. If a positive response: How was this achieved?

4b. If a negative response: What information or advice might you have expected to be provided?

5. What other information or advice services are offered by the Information Centre that you know of?

6. How did you hear about the Information Centre?

Summary of key findings

Of seventeen respondents, twelve lived locally and five were tourists. Information relating to tourist or leisure services accounted for nine enquiries, five enquiries related to general council or community information, with remaining queries encompassing education, nurseries, environment and council tax payment. Of the thirteen respondents requesting staff help, all were pleased with the way their enquiry was handled and with the outcome. Of the

eleven respondents who lived locally, four knew of some services offered by the one-stop shop while seven knew of all. Five respondents found out about the service by 'passing by', with the remaining twelve finding out through 'word of mouth' or the local media.

Appendix 3: Organisational structure of one-stop shops in local authorities of Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire County Council

Head of LIMA

Support Operations Manager

Information Centre Co-ordinator

Information Centre Assistant

Wycombe District Council

Head of Committees and Members Support

Marlow Area Information Centre Manager   Princes Risborough Area Office Manager

Two Information Assistants   Two Information Assistants .

(one Wycombe DC funded,   *(both Wycombe DC funded)*

one Buckinghamshire CC funded)

Chiltern District Council

Chief Financial Officer

Assistant Chief Financial Officer

Senior Income Officer

(One-stop shop staff yet to be appointed)