

Community Offices Update

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Purpose of the Report

To update Councillors on the yearly footfall/enquiry figures across the district and the results of the recent customer satisfaction survey.

Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has six community offices which enable the public to access a wide range of Council and related information and assistance. This supports the other ways of contacting SSDC, which is by phone or the website. This report gives an update of the number of customers who visit the offices and also includes results of the customer survey carried out in September 2014.

Recommendation

That Area East Committee members note the contents of this report.

Background

The community offices are located in Yeovil, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, Langport and Wincanton and are managed by the Community Office Support Manager and Deputy Community Office Support Manager. The Community Support Assistants also provide administrative and project support to the Area Development team.

The Community Offices

The opening hours are as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Chard | Monday to Friday 9am to 1pm, 1:30pm to 3:30pm |
| Crewkerne | Monday to Wednesday & Friday 9am to 1pm, 1:30pm to 3:30pm Thursday 9am to 1pm |
| Ilminster | Monday, Tuesday & Thursday 9:30am to 12pm |
| Langport | Monday, Tuesday & Thursday 9am to 2pm |
| Wincanton | Monday to Friday 9am to 1pm |
| Petters House Yeovil | Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm |

The main SSDC services provided for our customers are for the following services:

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Housing and Council Tax Benefits | Receipt, verification and scanning of applications forms and evidence, general advice and guidance |
| Council Tax | Advice and guidance on moving in/out of area, discounts and exemptions and instalment plans, processing of payments (debit cards) |
| Housing | Verification of evidence |
| Waste and Recycling | Advice on collection days, missed collection reports, ordering of new/replacement bins, payment of garden waste bins/bags |
| StreetScene | Report litter, fly tipping, dead animals, discarded needles, dangerous and stray dogs, dog fouling and graffiti |
| Community Protection | Report pest problems (rats, wasps, insects) |
| Horticulture | Report problems with shrub / tree / hedge maintenance |
| Planning and Building Control | Hand out application forms |
| Community Safety | Recording incidents |

Not all offices have exactly the same facilities either because of location or number of customers.

- Chard and Petters House have the highest number of customers. Cash machines have been installed and are used mostly for the payments of council tax and parking fines.
- Petters House reception is co-located with the SSDC Tourist Information Centre. Visitors to Petters House can also access a range of other services including Housing, Welfare Benefits and South Somerset Voluntary Community Action (SSVCA and Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB)).
- Langport reception is co-located with the Langport Local Information Centre and South Somerset Links Transport Service.
- The Wincanton community office is successfully co-located with the Police and Somerset County Council have two small offices that provide hot desk space for employees.
- All offices except Langport have a public computer.
- All front offices have a hearing loop
- Free phones to internal services are provided in Wincanton, Petters House and Chard.
- Chard has a Job point machine and phone run by Job Centre Plus which was installed when the Job Centre closed in the town centre and a reception facility is provided on the days that the Somerset County Council Registrar is available. Somerset County Council Social Services team also occupy space within the building.

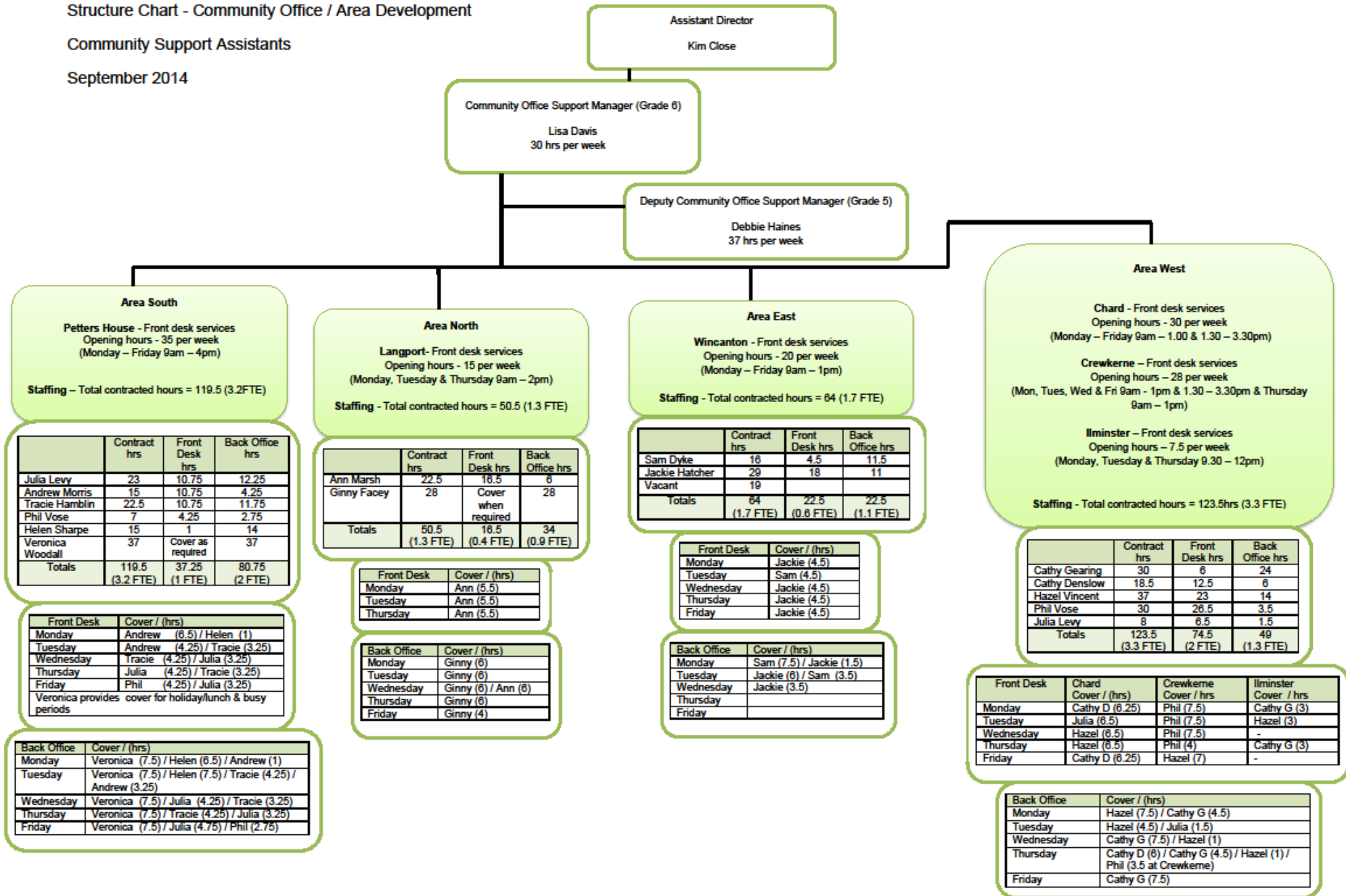
The community offices provide a face to face service which is particularly important to the more vulnerable members of the community. This enables customers to receive advice and assistance with many SSDC services. All community offices with the exception of Langport have a public computer which enables customers to access online services through self-service or assisted self-service. These computers are generally used to register for Homefinder or bid for Social Housing properties, apply for Benefits or view planning applications. During the last 12 months customers have been increasingly encouraged to submit online applications for benefits and Homefinder. An increased number of services have also been made available on the SSDC website enabling people to access more services from home.

The following structure chart shows the current level of staffing for each area

Structure Chart - Community Office / Area Development

Community Support Assistants

September 2014



During the past 12 months we have invested time to ensure that all Community Support Assistants are trained to deal with the wide range of front office enquiries and members of the team are now familiar with various front offices which ensures that planned and emergency cover can be provided. I am pleased to report that despite staffing levels being low at times we have been able to maintain full opening hours at all front offices since the new structure came into effect following the lean review. The community offices provide access to services for more vulnerable members of the community and also those who are unable or find it difficult to contact SSDC online or by phone.

All Community Support Assistants are now trained to provide phone cover for the Customer Service team. This has enabled support to be provided for their fortnightly team meetings and also enables calls to be taken in the event of increased call volumes/waiting times. These volumes and waiting times are monitored by the Community Office Support Manager/Deputy Community Office Support Manager alongside the Customer Services Manager so that the need for assistance can be identified promptly and resource provided as appropriate. Improved technology means that we are now able to take calls at any location providing a greater opportunity for support to be provided to the Customer Service team. During the period June – August 2014, the Community Support team spent 85 hours taking calls to assist the Customer Service team.

The Community Support team have access to the online referral system which enables them to refer customers as appropriate to the Welfare Benefits team and outside agencies such as CAB, SSVCA. The Welfare Benefits Advisors provide support and advice to many of the visitors to the front office and work closely with the Community Support team to raise awareness of the benefits that they may be entitled to.

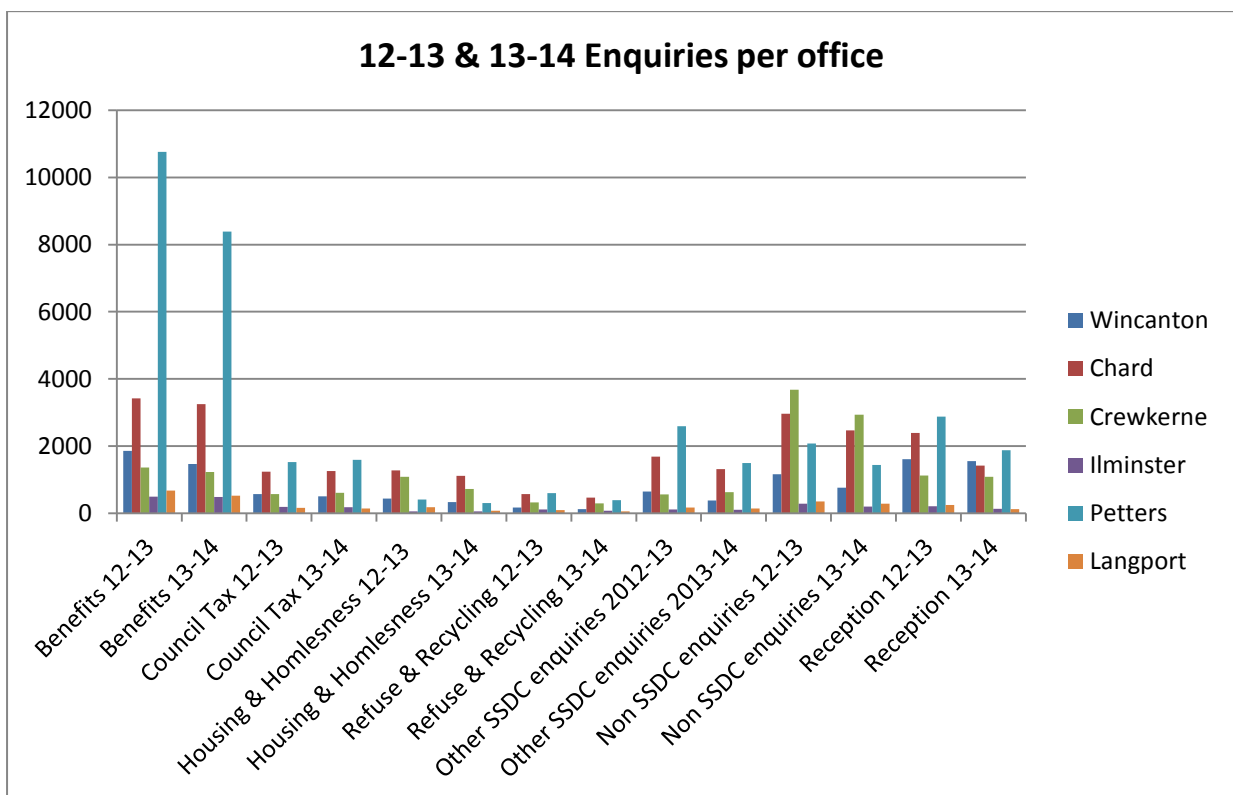
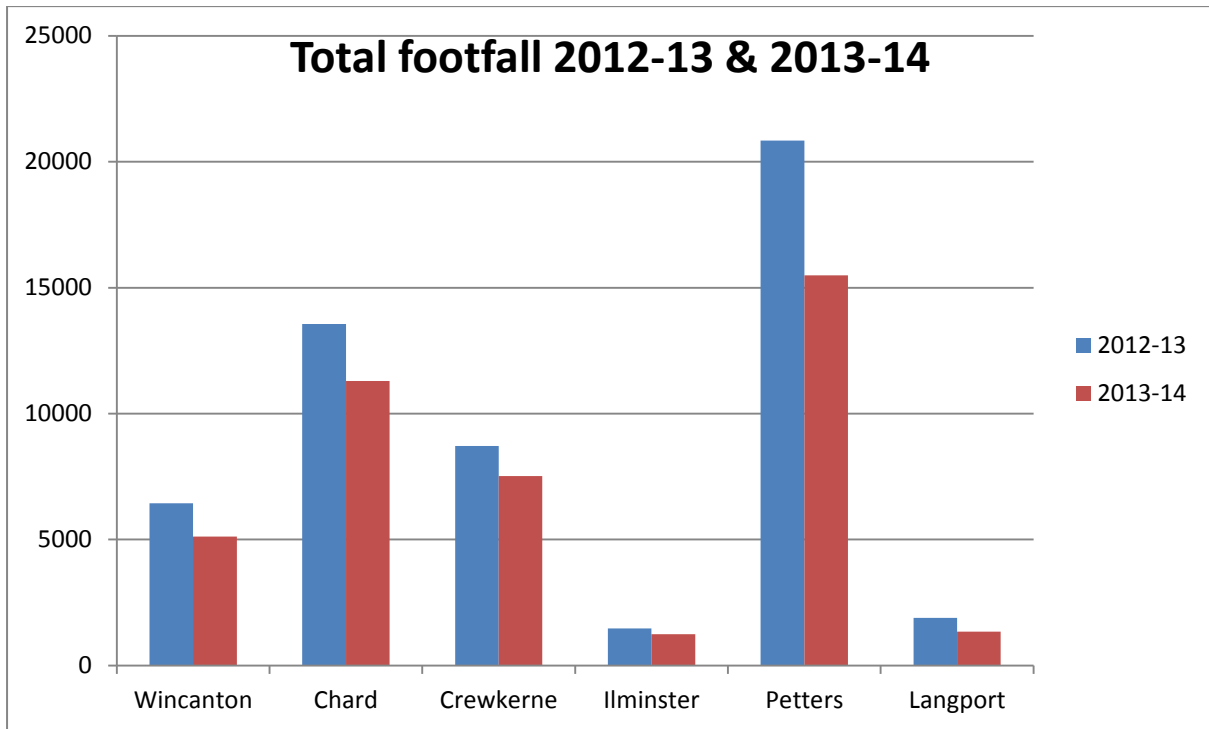
Footfall figures

The following table shows the number of enquiries in the last year for every office, this highlights the differences between offices.

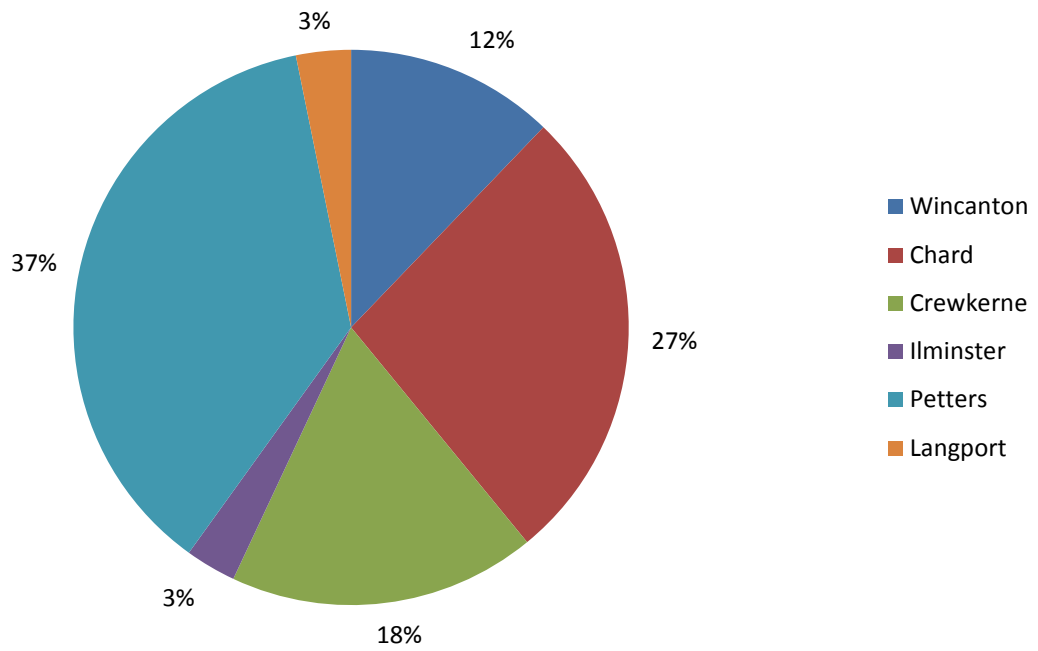
| | Wincanton | Chard | Crewkerne | Ilminster | Petters | Langport | Total |
|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Benefits | 1465 | 3253 | 1230 | 486 | 8388 | 523 | 15345 |
| Council Tax | 509 | 1255 | 611 | 177 | 1591 | 139 | 4282 |
| Housing & Homelessness | 335 | 1112 | 721 | 61 | 306 | 73 | 2608 |
| Refuse & Recycling | 122 | 466 | 299 | 78 | 389 | 57 | 1411 |
| Core service total * | 2431 | 6086 | 2861 | 802 | 10674 | 792 | 23646 |
| Other SSDC enquiries | 378 | 1317 | 633 | 102 | 1494 | 143 | 4067 |
| Non SSDC enquiries | 759 | 2473 | 2937 | 204 | 1442 | 287 | 8102 |
| Reception duties | 1549 | 1418 | 1089 | 135 | 1878 | 120 | 6189 |
| Total Footfall | 5117 | 11294 | 7520 | 1243 | 15488 | 1342 | 42004 |

- Core services are Benefits, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling

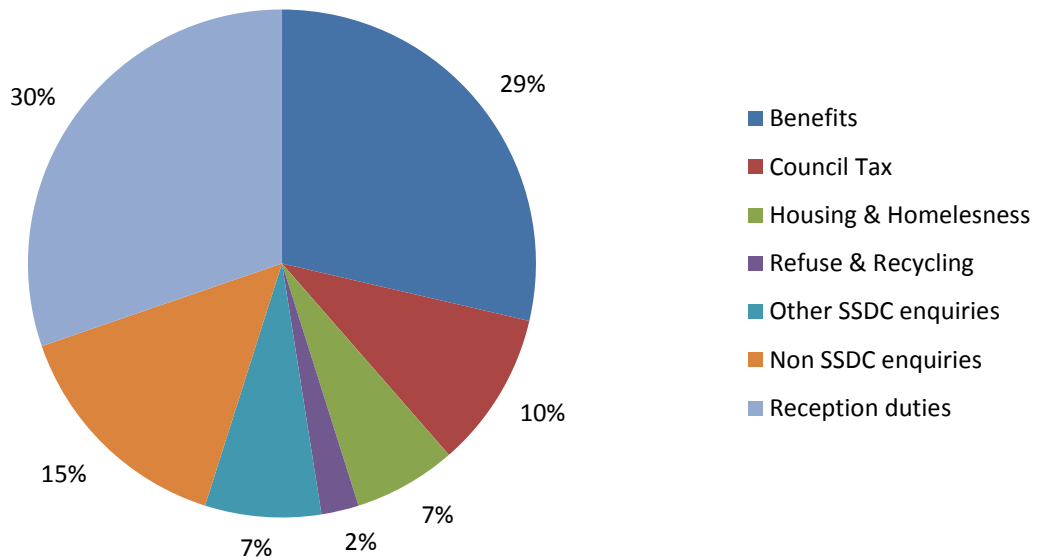
The charts below show a comparison of footfall and enquiries received at all offices in 2012-13 and 2013-14 and also a breakdown of enquiry types dealt with at Wincanton.



Total enquiries per office 13/14



Wincanton total enquiries for 13/14



It should be noted that the non SSDC enquiries include bus pass enquiries/issue of forms, visitors for the Registrar, Town Council and SCC enquiries and any other enquiries that fall outside of SSDC's remit.

The complexity of enquiries at the front office can vary, the following table gives an indication of the average time spent dealing with the more frequent enquiry types.

| Enquiry type | Average time spent dealing with enquiry | Enquiry type | Average time spent dealing with enquiry |
|---|---|--|---|
| Car Parking enquiry | 8 minutes | Request for waste containers | 5 minutes |
| Council Tax bill/banding enquiry | 5 minutes | Pest Control enquiry | 5 minutes |
| Council Tax move | 10 minutes | Garden bin renewals | 5 minutes |
| Housing Benefit enquiry | 10 minutes | Bulky collections | 5 minutes |
| Housing Benefit application submission (assuming form fully completed by applicant) | 20 minutes | Environmental Health/Streetscene enquiry (mapping) | 10 minutes |
| Homefinder/Housing enquiry | 10 minutes | Licensing enquiry | 8 minutes |
| Planning/Building Control enquiry | 2 minutes | Elections enquiry | 5 minutes |
| Report missed waste collection | 5 minutes | Reception service/issue form | 1 minute |

Wincanton

The total number of customers at the Area East reception (often referred to as footfall) for the 2013/14 financial year was 5,117 which is a small decrease from 5,876 in 2012/13. This decrease is likely to be due to better access to web and telephone based services, it should also be noted that the opening hours for the office were reduced by 50% in February 2013. The highest proportion of work undertaken by the Community Support Assistant's in the front office relate to Benefits. It should be noted that 30% of the enquiries relate to reception duties, this is mainly due to the meeting rooms at Churchfield being used regularly by SSDC departments and also external agencies such as Somerset County Council and Environment Agency.

Avon and Somerset Police are co-located with SSDC at Churchfield, they have their own front desk and their enquiry office opening hours vary from SSDC front office opening hours. During the period April 2013 – March 2014, 405 enquiries were received at the Police front desk.

It should be noted that visitors to Churchfield when the SSDC front office is closed but the Police enquiry office is open are able to access SSDC services using the public phone on the front desk and can also access services online using the public computer. We do not have any details relating to the number of calls made outside of SSDC front office opening hours.

Customer Survey

A customer satisfaction survey was carried out during two weeks of September 2014 in all of the community offices. 395 responses were received. The team received a 99% satisfaction score of Good or Very Good in questions 3 to 5 shown in Table 1 relating to their professionalism.

98% of our customers rated how welcoming our receptions are as Good or Very Good. Lastly, 96% said that the waiting time is Good or Very Good.

Table 1 Comparison of customer responses between 2013 and 2014 for all offices

| | | Very Poor | Poor | Neither | Good | Very Good |
|---|------|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| How welcoming did you find our reception area? | 2014 | 0.2% | 0.5% | 1.2% | 25% | 73% |
| | 2013 | 0% | 1% | 1% | 21% | 77% |
| How would you rate your waiting time before being seen? | 2014 | 0% | 0.5% | 3.5% | 21% | 73% |
| | 2013 | 0% | 0.4% | 2% | 20% | 78% |
| How welcoming were our staff? | 2014 | 0% | 0.2% | 0.7% | 18% | 80% |
| | 2013 | 0% | 0% | 0% | 14% | 86% |
| How would you rate the overall service you received? | 2014 | 0% | 0% | 1% | 17% | 81% |
| | 2013 | 0% | 0% | 0% | 13% | 87% |
| How knowledgeable were our staff? | 2014 | 0% | 0.2% | 0.8% | 18% | 81% |
| | 2013 | 0% | 0% | 0% | 13% | 87% |

The following responses were received with regard to accessing SSDC services:

| | |
|---|-----|
| Do you use the SSDC website? | |
| Yes | 22% |
| No | 78% |
| If no, what is the reason? | |
| No internet access | 27% |
| Prefer to visit community office | 73% |
| Do you contact SSDC by phone? | |
| Yes | 46% |
| No | 54% |
| If no, what is the reason? | |
| No access to a phone | 7% |
| Prefer to visit community office | 93% |
| Was the Community Support Assistant able to give you the information or help that you needed? | |
| Yes | 98% |
| No | 2% |

NB. these customers were referred to another agency

The results for Wincanton show that 10% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 19% find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems. This highlights the importance of local offices for the more vulnerable residents who are unable or find it difficult to contact SSDC online or by phone or who would be unable to access a central office.

Financial Implications

None arising directly from this report.

Council Plan Implications

Focus on Health and Communities. Continue to provide Welfare Benefits support and advice to tackle poverty for our vulnerable residents.

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

Reduce carbon emissions by increasing awareness of local offices and use of alternative methods of contact i.e. online transactions

Equality and Diversity Implications

All front desk services are accessible, except our Ilminster office, which can only be improved if suitable premises can be found.

Background Papers:
