

Community Offices Update

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Purpose of the Report

To update Councillors on the yearly footfall/enquiry figures across the district.

Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has 6 community offices which enable the public to access a wide range of Council related information and other assistance. This supplements 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 from April 15 through to end of March 16.

Recommendation

That the Area North Committee comment on and note the contents of the report.

Background

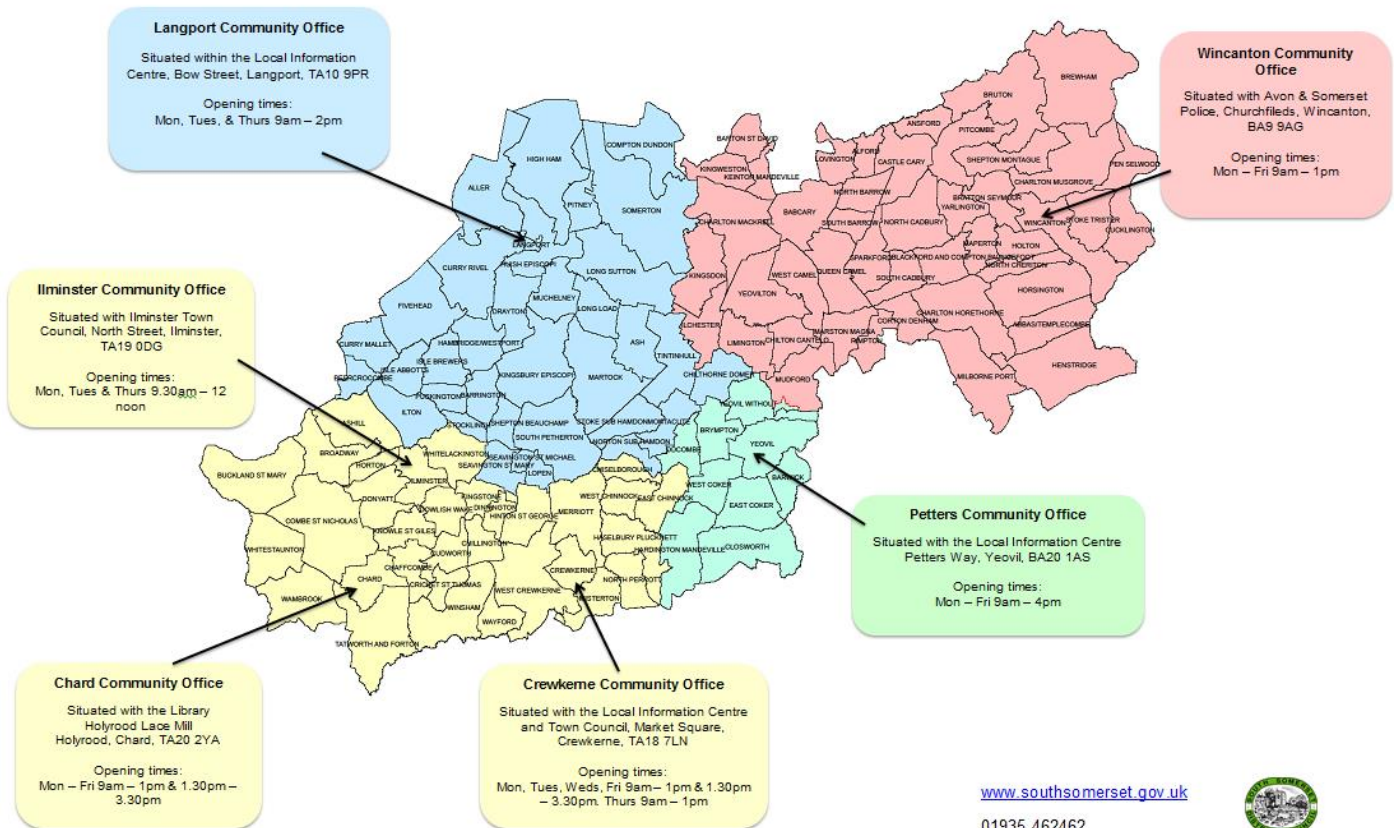
The community offices are located in Yeovil, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, Langport and Wincanton and are managed by the Community Office Support Manager and Deputy Community Office Support Manager, reporting to the Assistant Director, Communities. There are 13 (9.5FTE) Community Support Assistants (CSA) across the team who provide customer access to services assistance at the 6 Community offices. They also provide vital project and administrative support to the Area Development teams.

The Community Offices

The main SSDC services that customers visit our offices are:

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)
Homefinder (online social housing service)	Help with accessing the Homefinder service and weekly bidding process
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/Building Control	Hand out application forms
Community Safety	Recording incidents

SSDC Community Offices



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

- Cash machines are available in Petters House and Chard. Customers can make payments for council tax, parking fines, planning and building control applications.
- There is free public computer access in Petters House, Chard, Crewkerne & Wincanton allowing customers to access online services through self-service or assisted self-service.
- Free phone access to SSDC services in Petters House, Chard & Wincanton
- All offices are co-located with other authorities/agencies.
- All front offices have a hearing loop.
- All offices are fully accessible, except for Ilminster where it hasn't been possible to fully adapt.

Full Community Office information can be found at <http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/visit-our-offices/> or on our leaflets located at the offices.

The community offices provide face to face service and enables customers to receive advice and assistance to many SSDC services, as well as the ability to refer or signpost to other agencies where necessary. They ensure vulnerable members of the community and those who find it difficult or unable to contact the council by other means are able to fully access our services.

As well as the community offices, increasingly customers will access SSDC services over the phone and/or via the SSDC website. There are a number of services now available online; completing applications, various payment options, reporting issues (including missed waste and recycling collections) and registering to vote. Homefinder applications can only normally be done via the internet.

All Community Support Assistants are trained to deal with the wide range of front office enquiries and are able to cover any community office ensuring that full opening hours are maintained across the district. Generally there is only one member of staff on the front desk, but back up support is provided in the busier offices (Petters & Chard) to help reduce customer waiting time.

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. There is a weekly surgery held by the Welfare Benefits team in the Crewkerne Community office and the Welfare Benefits Advisors provide support and advice to many of the visitors to the front office. They work closely with the Community Support team to raise awareness of the benefits that people may be entitled to. During 2015 - 16 the team made around 150 Welfare benefit referrals.

The Community Support Assistants also have the ability to support the Contact Centre by picking up calls from the area offices in order to help reduce call waiting times during busier periods.

Neighbourhoods within Yeovil West and Yeovil Central fall within 10% of the most deprived areas within South Somerset with neighbourhoods within Yeovil East and Chard Jocelyn falling within 20%. (Source: 2015 Indices of Deprivation mapper).

Highlights

Across the Community Offices overall footfall has reduced by 8% with core service footfall reducing by 10% from the previous year.

Web transactions have increased by 20%.

It should be noted that the offices at Chard, Wincanton & Petters have their own bookable meeting rooms and visitors for meetings are included as part of reception duties footfall.

Housing & Homelessness footfalls showed a slight increase and during 15-16 applicants were asked to provide supporting evidence for new applications, renewals and updating existing applications. The housing register figures have not increased during the year.

Around 12,000 (43%) customers (excluding reception footfall) visiting the Community Offices came in for benefits help, queries, or to provide additional information/evidence in support of their benefit applications. 1,800 (12%) customers required additional support or assistance - i.e. help to complete online/paper forms/evidence.

During 2015 - 16 there were 3,675 benefit application forms received by SSDC, this is a reduction of 6.6% from 2014 - 15. Of this number 17% of applications were received online, compared to 14% in 2014 -15.

Looking forward the Benefits team will be looking at our on-line provision and how they can make the switch from the majority of forms being paper based to being on-line.

Universal Credit is due to be fully rolled out across South Somerset in early 2017, this means that anyone of working age who has a rent liability will no longer claim housing benefit from the Council. Instead they will claim Universal Credit from DWP. However, if they are liable to pay Council Tax they will need to make an application for that from the Council.

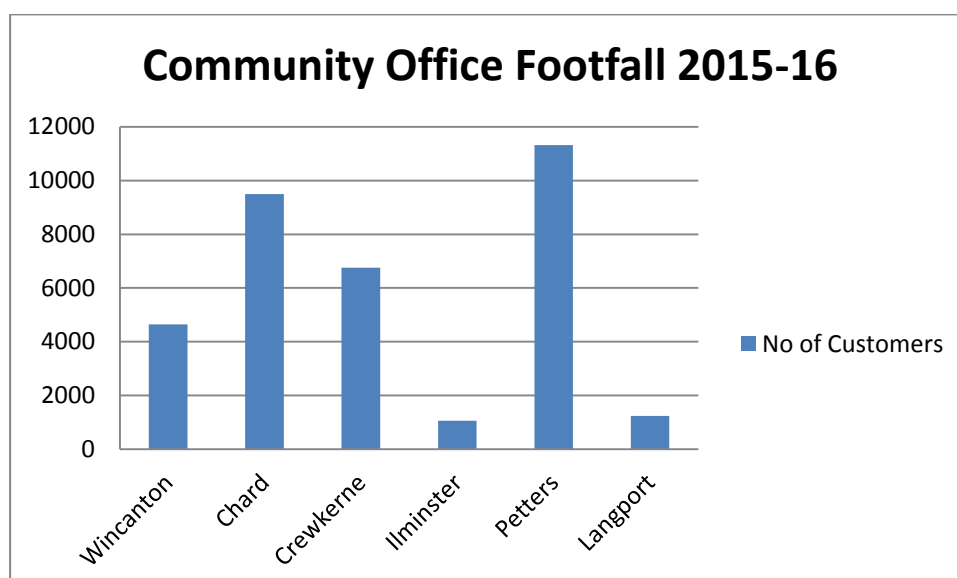
Cash machine transactions remained around the same in Chard (6,539 transactions) but reduced at Petters (8,956 transactions – a decrease of around 900 from the previous year). A cash machine was installed at Brympton Way in January 2014 and customers now have two places of access in Yeovil. Transactions at Brympton Way for 2015-16 were 2,489. The number of customers paying their Council Tax by Direct debit has increased with approximately 65% of bills now being paid by Direct Debit.

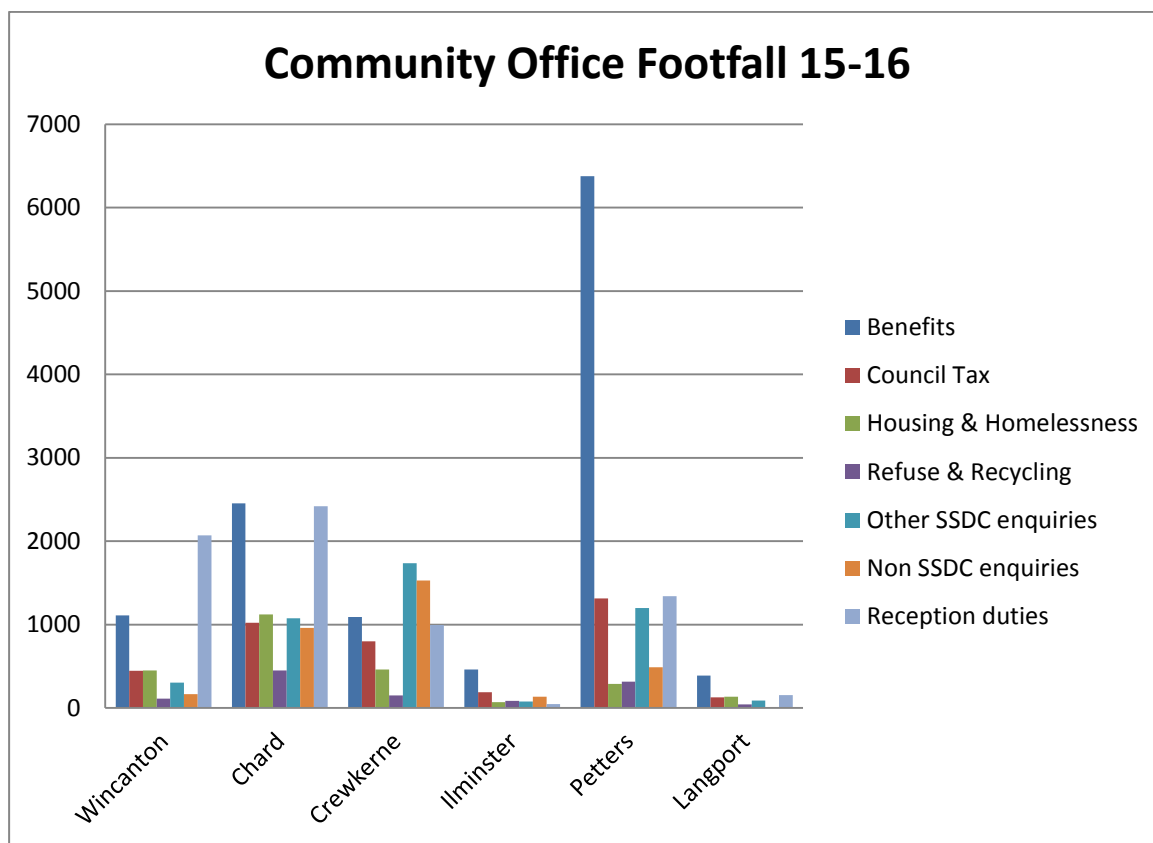
Footfall figures (Number of customers visiting the Community Offices)

Total footfall comparisons for all Community Offices from April 2012 - April 2016

All SSDC Community Offices	2012 - 2013	2013 - 2014	% change in footfall 12/13 - 13/14	2014-2015	% change in footfall 13/14 - 14/15	2015-16	% change in footfall 14-15 - 15-16
Benefits	18561	15345	-17%	13560	-12%	11874	-12%
Council Tax	4270	4282	0.3%	4250	-0.7%	3894	-8%
Housing & Homelessness	3450	2608	-24%	2306	-12%	2523	9%
Refuse & Recycling	1882	1411	-25%	1469	4%	1156	-21%
Core services total	28163	23646	-16%	21585	-9%	19447	-10%
Other SSDC enquiries	5768	4067	-29%	4206	3%	4474	6%
Non SSDC enquiries	10522	8102	-23%	6832	-16%	3585	-48%
Reception duties	8462	6189	-27%	4848	-22%	7019	45%
Total Footfall	52915	42004	-21%	37471	-11%	34525	-8%

*Core services relate to Benefits, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling





Customer satisfaction

Our annual customer satisfaction survey will be completed in September 2016.

The future

In the coming year we will be looking to increase awareness of the services provided at the Community Offices and ensure that the service provided best meets the needs of the customer. With an increase in digital access there is a continuing need to support customers to access services online and raise awareness of alternative methods to access information and services.

Although still at an early stage, the Council's Transformation Programme will focus on the needs and preferences of customers using the network of community offices. In the meantime we will continue to work with other SSDC services to ensure that we are fully aware of any changes and that the Community Support Assistants have the knowledge and access to the systems to provide the best possible front facing service.

The Community Support team has recently been updated on Business Rates and it is hoped that this will enable more information and support to be provided to local businesses. They will also be receiving training in the near future to assist with the receipt of taxi licences and DBS checks for drivers in the community offices.

The internal SSDC courier will cease at the end of July. Customers who pay Council Tax or other payments via cheque will now be required to post directly to Brympton Way or pay by other means ie cash machine, direct debit or online. The Community Support Assistants will

continue to help customers to use alternative methods of payment where possible and monitor impact.

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 alternative suitable premises can be found.

Background Papers: *Community Office Update Nov 15*
