

## Community Offices Update 2016/17

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### Purpose of the Report

To update Area South Committee on the footfall/enquiry figures across the district for the period April 2016 through to the end of March 2017.

### Recommendation

Members are asked to note and comment on the contents of this report

### Background

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

The main SSDC services that customers visit our offices for 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, garden waste payments
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, view applications online
Community Safety	Recording incidents

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.
- 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.

The community offices provide a 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. The number of services available online is increasing.

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 2016 - 17 the team made around 160 Welfare benefit referrals.

The team also have the ability to support the Contact Centre by answering calls from the area offices in order to help reduce call waiting times during busier periods.

## Highlights

- Area South (Petters House) saw a total of 9584 customers and visitors in 2016 -17. A reduction of 15% from the previous year with a 16% reduction for core services (Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling). Across the Community Offices the overall footfall has reduced by 11% with core service footfall reducing by 13% from the previous year.
- Web transactions have increased by 10% from the previous year. It should be noted that this is a lower increase compared to last year but during 2015-16 there was a large increase in the number of web services made available.
- It should be noted that the offices at Petters House, Chard & Wincanton have their own bookable meeting rooms and visitors for meetings are included as part of the reception duties footfall and therefore part of the overall footfall figures.
- 67% of Petters House customers (excluding visitors) came in for benefits help, queries, or to provide additional information/evidence in support of their benefit applications.
- During 2016 - 17 there were 3,018 benefit application forms received by SSDC, this is a reduction of 11.8% from 2015 – 16. Of this number 29% of applications were received online, compared to 20% in 2015 -16.
- The Benefits team have enhanced the on-line provision of their forms and receipt of evidence and customers are encouraged to apply for Housing Benefit online rather than being issued with a paper form.
- Universal Credit was fully rolled out across South Somerset in April 2017, this means that anyone of working age who has a rent liability no longer claims housing benefit from the Council. Instead they claim Universal Credit from DWP who from June 1<sup>st</sup> will notify us of

anyone claiming that has a liability for Council Tax. The Community Support Assistants are assisting customers who are digitally challenged with online Universal Credit claims in the community offices at Petters House, Chard and Wincanton.

- Cash machine transactions have reduced in Petters (7,511 transactions – a decrease of around 1,400 from the previous year) in Chard (5,809 transactions – a decrease of around 700 from the previous year). Transactions at Brympton Way cash machine for 2016-17 were 2,879, which is an increase of around 400 from the previous year. The number of customers paying their Council Tax by Direct debit has increased with approximately 69% of bills now being paid by Direct Debit (this is a 4% increase from last year).

## Customer satisfaction

Our annual customer satisfaction survey was completed in March 2017

Customer age group analysis

16-29	18%
30-44	26%
45-59	24%
60-74	24%
75+	7%

The team once again received a 99% satisfaction score of Good or Very Good relating to the overall service received

97% of customers rated the waiting time before being seen as Good or Very Good

99.6% rated the knowledge of the staff as Good or Very Good

98% of customers said that the CSA had been able to provide the information or help that was needed with the other 2% of customers being referred to another agency.

Comments received from customers on help provided and the service office included:

*“Service was excellent”*

*“Very helpful people”*

*“Could open on Saturday mornings”*

*“I think on the budget SSDC have it is as good as it gets”*

*“Customer service was great”*

*“I think the service is as good as it gets and always a pleasure visiting the office”*

*“Longer opening hours”*

Customers were also asked why they had chosen to call at the office rather than using another office, phone us or use our website

64% of customers said the office was near to their home, 3% did not have access to a computer or website access on their phone and 8% said they found it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems

33% of customers have used the SSDC website in the past and 23% said they have not used the website because they have no internet access

73% prefer to visit the community office

Comments received from customers on why they use the offices:

*"I prefer to come to the office, despite not having any of the access difficulties"*

*"Easier face to face as they can tell you what's what and help"*

*"I like contact in person"*

*"Required to provide documents"*

*"Had to bring in proof"*

## **The Future**

In the coming months 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. 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 to ensure that service provided best meets the needs of the customer.

## **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 2016*