

Community Offices Update 2016/17

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Purpose of the Report

- To update Area West Committee on the footfall/enquiry figures across the district for the period April 2016 through to the end of March 2017.
- To highlight the low and continuously declining, core service footfall in Ilminster and request approval to implement changes to the provision of face to face contact in this area with effect from 2 January 2018.

Recommendation

- Members are asked to note and comment on the contents of this report.
- To continue to provide face to face services in an alternative way to best suit customer demand and withdraw from Ilminster Community Office.

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

- The Chard front office saw a total of 7,776 customers and visitors in 2016 -17. A reduction of 18% from the previous year with a 12% reduction for core services (Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling).
- The Crewkerne office saw a total of 6,313 customers and visitors in 2016 -17. A reduction of 7% from the previous year with an 11% reduction for core services
- The Ilminster office saw a total of 1,046 customers and visitors in 2016 -17. A reduction of 1% from the previous year with a 13% reduction for core services
- 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.
- 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 1st 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"

Key facts relating to Ilminster

- Ilminster Community office is open 7.5 hours per week (9.30am – 12pm Monday, Tuesday and Thursday).
- The total footfall at Ilminster during 2016-17 was 1,046, only 3.5% of the overall footfall into the community offices. 701 of these customers accessed a core service.
- Around 10,000 (33%) customers visiting the Community Offices came in for benefits help, queries, or to provide additional information/evidence in support of their benefit applications. Only 3.8% of the total benefits queries were dealt with at Ilminster.
- 266 (25%) of the enquiries dealt with at Ilminster during 2016-17 related to the receipt of benefits evidence, an additional 52 (5%) customers were assisted with benefits claims/evidence.
- The full rollout of Universal Credit in April 2017 has resulted in a reduction in receipt of benefits evidence. During the period April – July 2017 there has been a 25% reduction in the receipt of benefits evidence at Ilminster compared with the same period last year.
- It should be noted that although there was only a 1% reduction in footfall last year there are many repeat visitors to the community offices, although we do not have detailed information of these we are aware that many customers visit Ilminster to access repeat transactions ie. monthly payment of Council Tax.
- During a three week period in July/August 2017 additional information was recorded relating to the visitors to the Ilminster Community office, in particular relating to where they live and service required.

Total no. of visitors over the three week period

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Number of SSDC related visitors | 33 (average 3.7 per day) |
| Number of Non-SSDC related visitors | 6 |
| Total no of visitors | 39 |

Visitor information requesting SSDC services only

| Location | Regular user | New user | Service required | Priority Group - Older People, Carers, the Disabled and people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds |
|------------------|--------------|----------|---|---|
| Ilminster | 19 | 9 | 14 x benefit, 7 x council tax, 2 x electoral roll, 2 x general information, 2 x housing, 1 planning | 13 x older, 2 x needing additional support, 1 x English not their first language |
| Buckland St Mary | 0 | 1 | Council tax | None |
| Fivehead | 0 | 1 | Benefit | 1 x older |
| Shepton Beachamp | 1 | 1 | 1 x Benefit, 1 x Housing | 1 x disabled |
| Ilton | 0 | 1 | Council tax | None |

12 out of 33 of the visitors during the three week period said that they would be unable to access the service via another method, 7 of these stated that the reason for this was either no transport or no access to the internet with 5 stating they prefer face to face contact. 11 of these customers fell into the above Priority Group.

Proposal for customer service delivery in Ilminster

In the coming months the Council's Transformation programme will focus on the needs and preferences of customers that use 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 most efficient and effective 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.

The continuing low footfall at Ilminster Community office means that it would seem an appropriate time to look at the face to face provision in this area. The current business model is no longer feasible and this is an opportunity to continue to provide a service by alternative methods and ascertain valuable information to inform the transformation programme going forward. It is also worth noting that Ilminster Community Office does not fully meet access requirements.

Recommendation:

- Over a three month lead in period withdraw from Ilminster Community Office and focus on encouraging and supporting customers to access services online and raise awareness of alternative methods to access information and services to ensure that the service provided best meets the needs of the customer

- During the three month period liaise with other SSDC departments and the Transformation team to flag up and resolve customer issues raised and review outcomes
- During the three month period review alternative suitable venues to meet with customers within Ilminster for example Library, Doctors surgeries. This also gives us an opportunity to forge working relationships with other authorities/organisations.
- Following the three month period we would offer appointment based surgeries/visits as appropriate for those customers requiring further assistance – i.e. customers who are unable to conduct SSDC business by any other means or access another office.

This proposal has been endorsed by Senior Leadership Team as a good way of testing various aspects of service delivery through transformation.

Community Support staff will continue to:

- assist and encourage customers to move over to digital services where possible
- assist and run an appointment based service for vulnerable customers who are unable to access SSDC services by any other means
- promote digital by default campaigns – ie uploading benefit/Council Tax evidence, online benefit/Council Tax applications, paying Council Tax by direct debit
- provide additional project support to the Area Development teams

To enable the appointment based surgeries to take place one off costs of up to £75 (for a wi-fi enabled tablet) or up to £500 (for a 3G enabled tablet) would be incurred. If 3G enabled tablets were purchased there would be an additional monthly cost of up to £15 per month for each device.

Financial Implications

There would be no new budgetary implications. Costs will be covered within the existing budget.

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.

Equality Analysis Assessments have been completed for Ilminster Community Offices – please see Appendix A

Background Papers: *Community Office Update 2016*

Appendix A – Equality Analysis Assessment