

Iminster Community Office

Director: Alex Parmley, Chief Executive
Assistant Director: Helen Rutter, Communities Lead
Lead Officer: Lisa Davis, Community Office Support Manager
Contact Details: lisa.davis@southsomerset.gov.uk 01935 462746

Purpose of the Report

To provide further details of the amended provision of face to face contact in Iminster.

Recommendation

To continue to provide face to face services in an alternative way to best suit customer demand including the withdrawal from Iminster Community Office with effect from 1 February 2018.

Background

During discussion at Area West Committee in September members felt that the alternative model for Iminster would need to be suitable to address the growing ageing population and requested that further details of the proposal be brought back to a future Area West Committee meeting.

Key facts relating to Iminster

- Iminster Community office is open 7.5 hours per week (9.30am – 12pm Monday, Tuesday and Thursday).
- The total footfall at Iminster 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 during 2016-17 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 Iminster.
- 266 (25%) of the enquiries dealt with at Iminster 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 Iminster 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 Iminster to access repeat transactions ie. monthly payment of Council Tax.
- There is an average of 3.7 SSDC related visitors to the office each day

Proposal for customer service delivery in Iminster

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.

Since the last meeting we have looked at the existing community facilities in Ilminster to identify if any are suitable to hold appointments with customers.

Library

The opening hours are:

Monday 9.30am – 12pm

Tuesday 9.30am – 4.30pm

Wednesday 9.30am – 12pm

Thursday Closed

Friday 9.30am – 4.30am

Saturday 9.30am – 12pm

The library offers two computers that could be used or alternatively there is wi-fi access available. Printing and photocopying services are available but at the present time there is no scanning facility.

The library staff already assist customers to access Homefinder and a minimal number of District Council services online.

Local Information Centre (LIC)/Arts Centre

The LIC/Arts Centre does not have wi-fi or any accessible space that would be suitable to meet customers.

Somerset Skills and Learning

The Somerset Skills and Learning centre has available space that could be booked in advance and used at a cost but the rooms are a lot larger than required.

Summervale Surgery

This surgery is located outside of the town centre but situated close to an extensive residential area.

There is a meeting room with wi-fi access that could be used for appointments at no cost. It should be noted that Citizens Advice hold their weekly surgery at this location.

Once a suitable venue to hold appointments has been agreed we will commence a targeted marketing campaign to ensure that details of how to access face to face services following the withdrawal from the Ilminster office are widely available.

Recommendation:

- Over a two 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 two month period liaise with other SSDC departments and the Transformation team to flag up and resolve customer issues raised and review outcomes.
- During the two month period agree alternative suitable venues to meet with customers within Ilminster, these would include the Library and Doctors surgeries. This also gives us an opportunity to forge working relationships with other authorities/organisations.
- Following the two month period we would offer appointment based 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 a 3G enabled tablet was purchased there would be an additional monthly cost of up to £15.

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

Ilminster Community Office is not accessible, which can only be improved if alternative suitable premises can be found.

An Equality Analysis Assessment has been completed for Ilminster Community Office

Background Papers: *Community Office Update 2017*
