

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 West 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

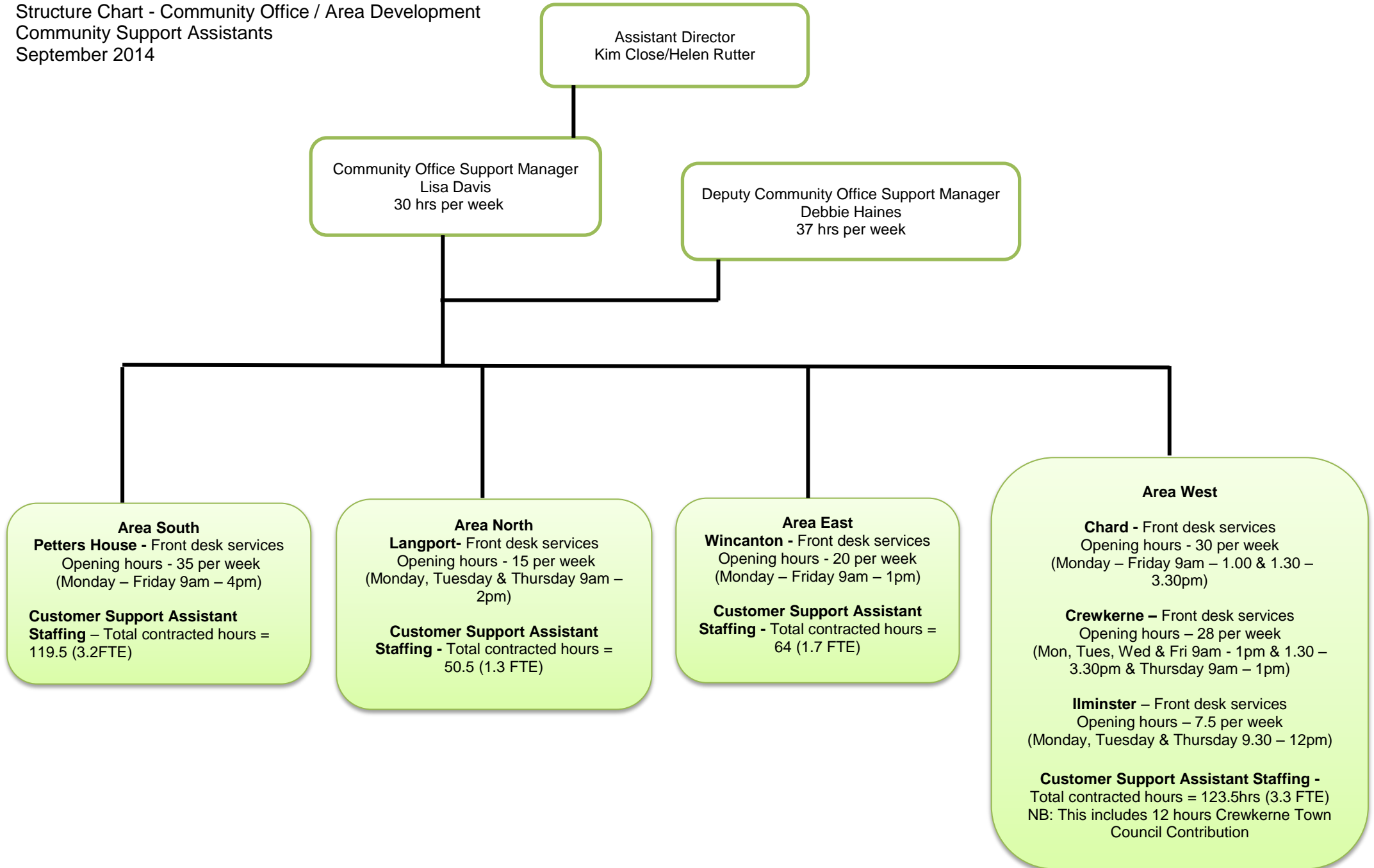
Not all offices have exactly the same facilities either because of location or number of customers.

- 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 and Ilminster 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 is co-located with the Library. Crewkerne is co-located with the Local Information Centre and Town Council and Ilminster is also co-located with the Town Council.
- 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, however the Job point is to be removed at the end of November and the Job Phone is currently under review. There is also a reception facility 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. June – August was particularly problematic for the Customer Service Team due to a range of issues but there has since been less of a need for the Community Support Assistants to provide phone cover. Although this is still monitored on a regular basis and we still assist when required.

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.

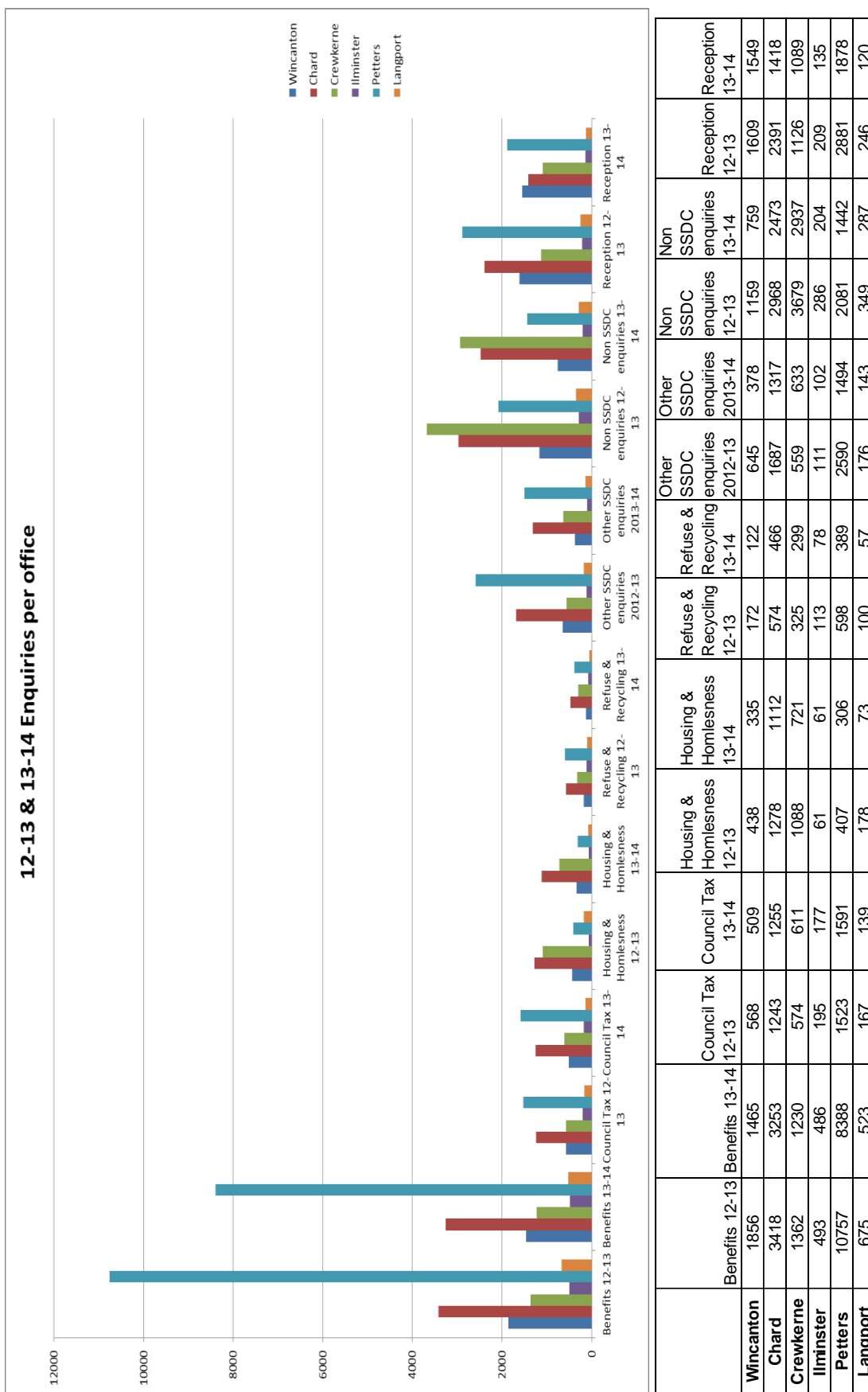
Footfall figures

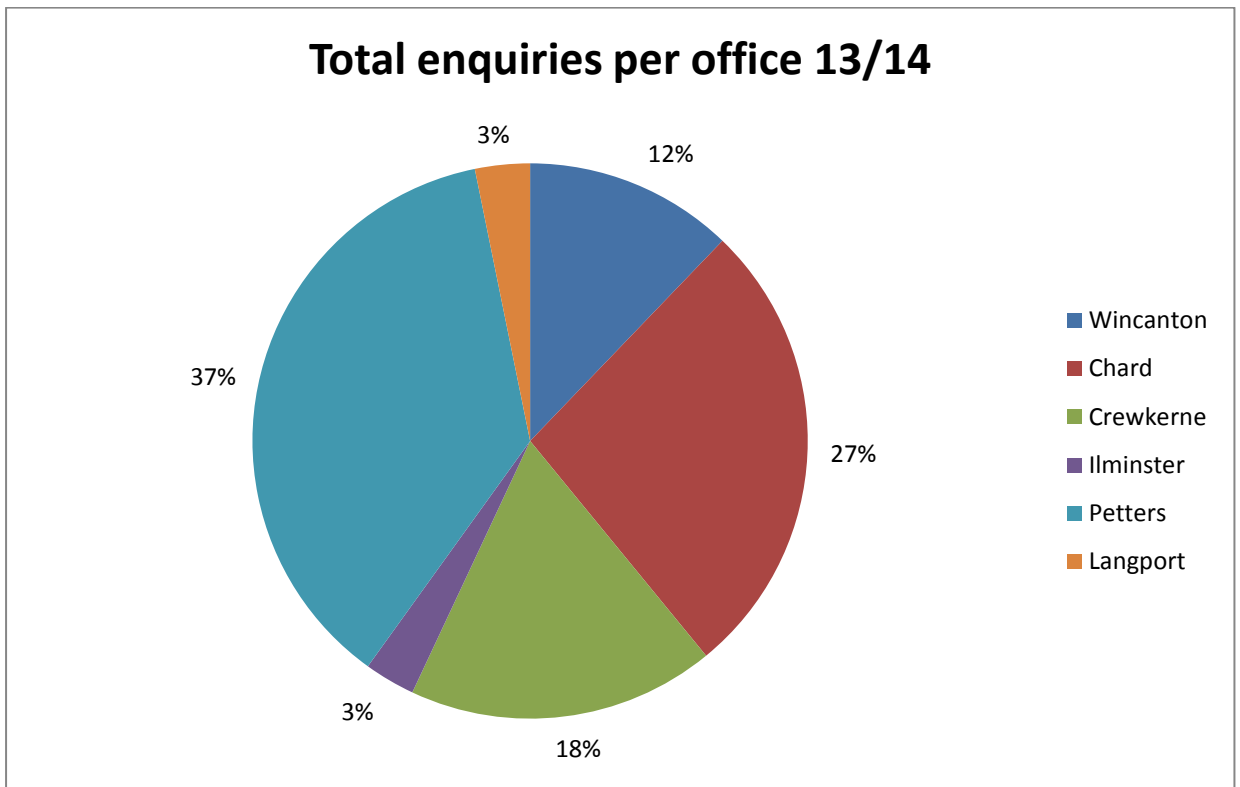
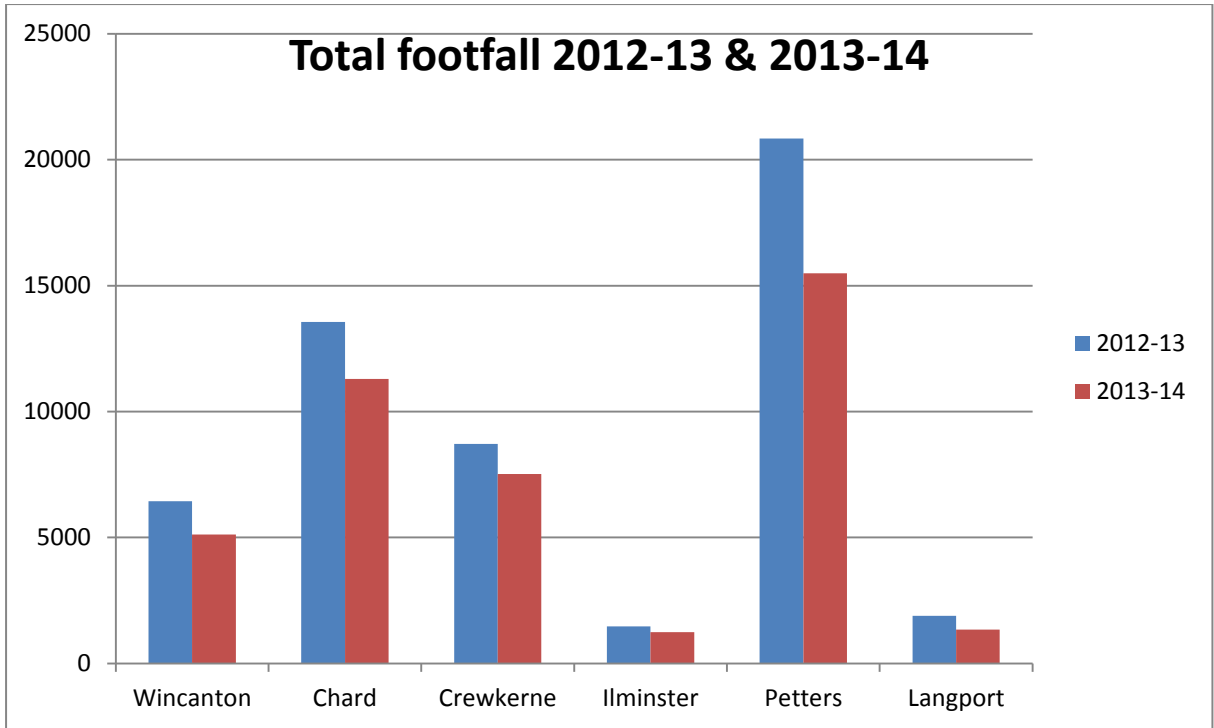
The following table shows the number of enquiries in the last year for every office, this highlights the differences between offices.

	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

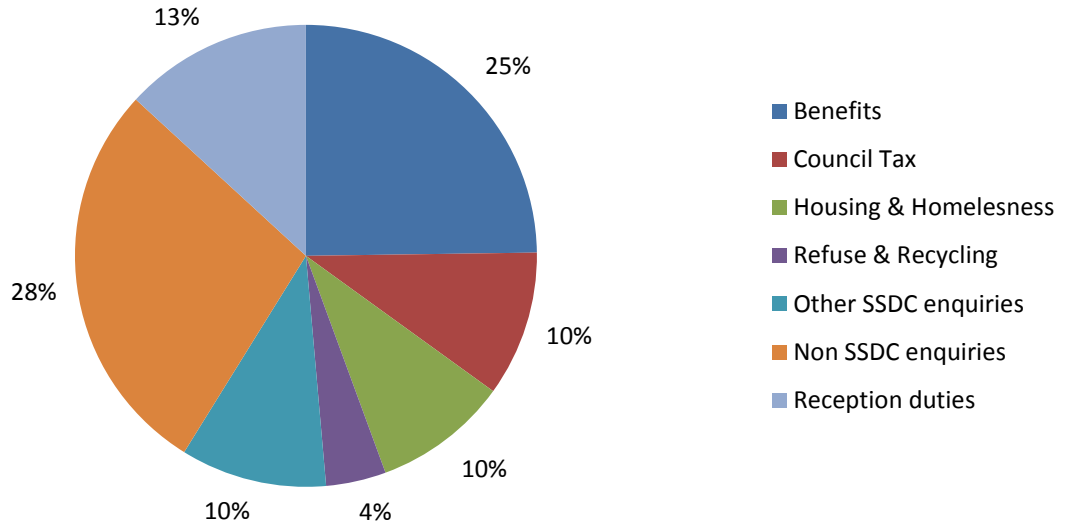
- Core services are Benefits, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling

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 Chard, Crewkerne & Ilminster Community offices.

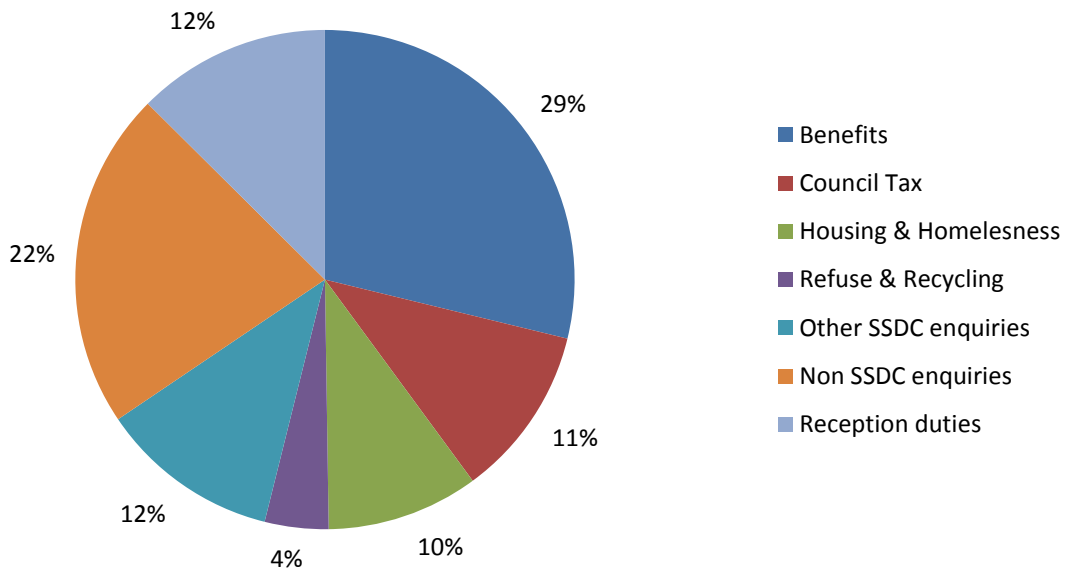




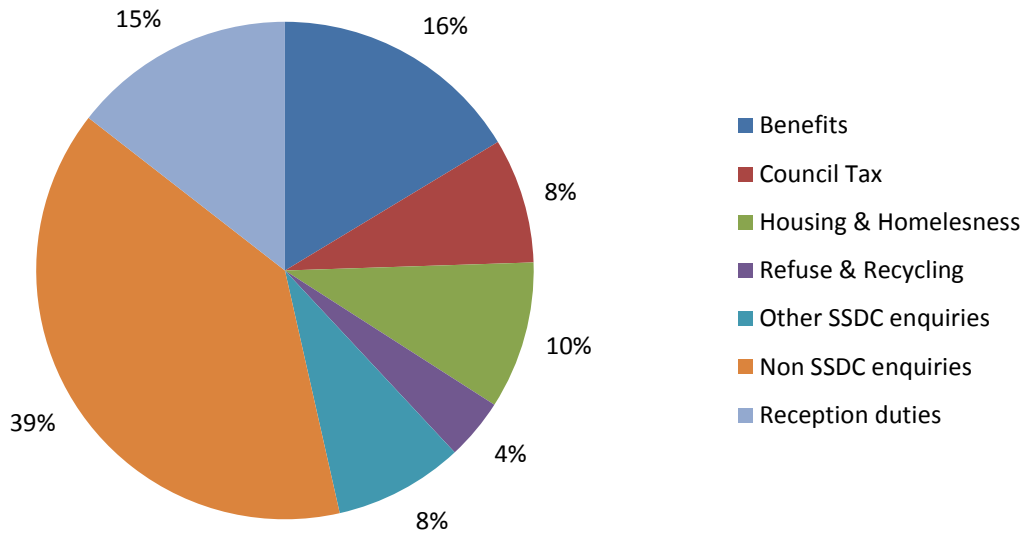
Total % enquiries 2013/14 Area West (Chard, Crewkerne and Ilminster)



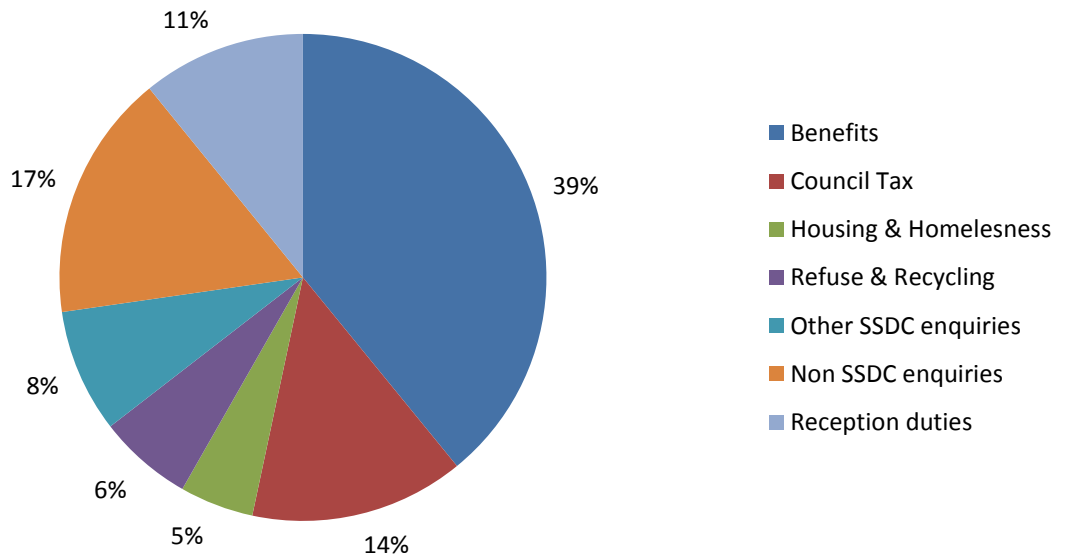
Chard total enquiries for 13/14



Crewkerne total enquiries for 13/14



Ilminster total enquiries for 13/14



It should be noted that the non SSDC enquiries include bus pass enquiries/issue of forms, visitors for organisations co-located with SSDC, 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

Chard

SSDC staff provide help for visitors with issues such as Housing and Welfare Benefits, together with general enquires relating to council services.

The total number of customers at the Chard reception (often referred to as footfall) for the 2013/14 financial year was 11,294 which is a decrease from 13,559 in 2012/13. The highest proportion of work undertaken by the Community Support Assistants in the front office relate to Benefits.

The job point and phone located in the front office is available for public use. During the period January – December 2013 2,448 calls were made using the job phone. The phone gives customer access to DWP (Department of Work and Pension) information including Job Centre Plus, Pension Service, National Insurance information as well as Tax Credits. However as mentioned previously this is under review.

Crewkerne

The total number of customers at the Crewkerne reception for the 2013/14 financial year was 7,520 which is a decrease from 8,713 in 2012/13. The highest proportion of work undertaken by the Community Support Assistants relate to non SSDC enquiries. A Welfare Benefits surgery is held weekly and Crewkerne Town Council provide an equivalent of 12 hours Community Support Assistant funding per week to help support the Community Office and encourage a wider variety of enquiries.

Iminster

The total number of customers at the Iminster office for the 2013/14 financial year was 1,243 which is a decrease from 1,468 in 2012/13. The highest proportion of work undertaken by the Community Support Assistants in the front office relate to Benefits.

There has been an overall decrease in footfall across all SSDC Community Offices.

The Area West offices received 48% of total enquiries throughout the district during 2013/14.

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 Chard show that 2% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 7% do not have access to a pc or website access on

a phone and 6% find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

The results for Crewkerne show that 7% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 8% do not have access to a pc or website access on a phone and 7% find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

The results for Ilminster show that 6% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 6% do not have access to a pc or website access on a phone and 13% 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: None
