

Area North Committee – 17th December 2008

11. Promoting Local Access to Services - Area North Community Offices (Executive decision)

Head of Service: Charlotte Jones, Head of Area Development (North)
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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work of the Area North Community Offices and request £2,000 from the Area North Reserves to enhance access to information and services in existing and additional locations.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

- (1) Note and comment on the contents of the report.
- (2) Note the position on each office and planned next steps, as set out in Section 2.
- (3) Request a further update report in 12 months, with quarterly reports within the Area Development Plan.
- (4) Allocate £2,000 from the Area North Reserves to provide an equipment and materials budget delegated to the Area Support team Leader to improve and promote local access to services, including community led schemes.

Background

The SSDC community offices in Area North are situated at Old Kelways, as part of the Area North offices and in Somerton in the Parish Rooms, on a lease from the Ladysmith Memorial Institute.

The Langport office also provides reception services to officers based at Old Kelways on behalf of the district and county council. Until recently the Somerton Community Office was shared with Somerton Town Council, who have now relocated to new premises.

The management of the SSDC Community Offices, which transferred from the Customer First team in April 2007, is the responsibility of the Area North Support Team Leader.

The opening hours for Somerton are 9 am to 12 midday, Monday to Friday and Langport are 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Thursday and 9 am to 4:45 pm on Friday. The number of staff required to cover the opening hours is equivalent to 1.5.

Other community offices in Area North are: based in Langport itself and managed by the Langport Area Development Trust, which includes a Local Information Centre and in Martock, where the parish council are about to complete the refurbishment of the Market House for a new community office. The David Hall in South Petherton hosts a police post.

Many other locations in Area North, including libraries, post offices and village halls and other community buildings, offer a wide range of information, advice and access to services.

The Area North development plan includes the local priority number 6: *Promote access to public / voluntary services, including access to business support.*

1. Footfall figures for Somerton and Langport: 2007 and 2008

Customers throughout the district are offered the same service in all the Community Offices as received in the Customer Contact Centre with the advantage of talking to staff with local knowledge.

All the Community Office staff are able to discuss, give help and receive housing and council tax benefit forms. The only service that is different is cash payments, which is now received by machines in Petters House, Yeovil and in Chard.

Chart 1 shows the number of customers to the Area Office at Langport and the community office at Somerton. Table 1 then shows a breakdown of the services provided to those customers.

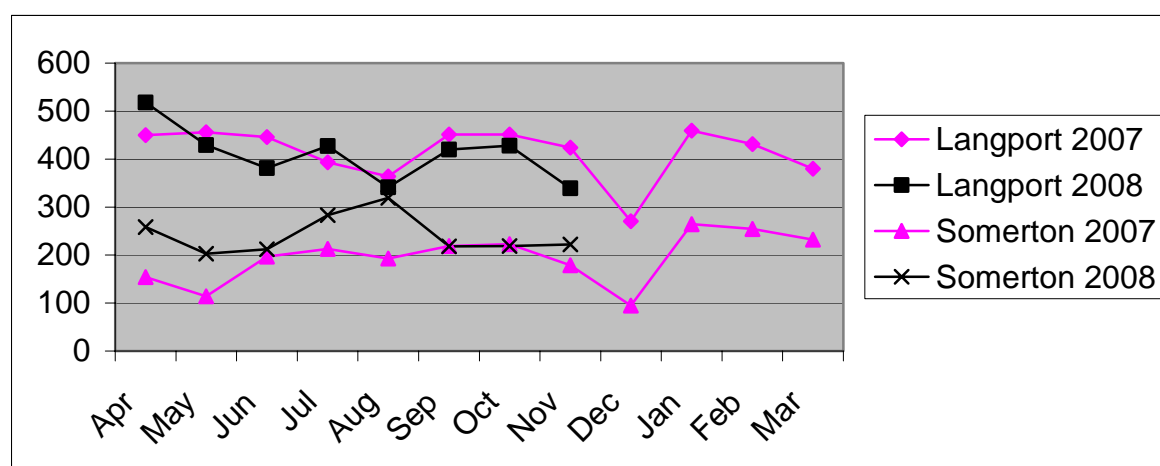


Chart 1: Number of Customers in 2007 and 2008

	Langport		Somerton	
	2007	Apr-Nov 2008	2007	Apr-Nov 2008
Reception services	1,840	1100	465	702
Benefits	466	326	171	192
Building Control	189	54	13	4
Bus Pass	371	472	323	353
Car parks	8	9	9	12
Licensing	6	20	3	3
Council Tax	255	149	54	75
Elections & Democratic Services	52	15	2	12
Environmental Health (inc pests)	98	46	16	15
Housing & Homelessness	187	146	72	56
Planning	695	362	168	66
Waste & Recycling	209	99	64	171

	Langport		Somerton	
	2007	Apr-Nov 2008	2007	Apr-Nov 2008
Tourism, heritage & countryside	53	42	127	120
Horticulture & Streetscene	61	51	30	34
Town Council	12	14	233	249
County Council (Social services, locality team)	236	215	10	39
County Council Issue (other)	71	70	61	32

Table 1: Number of requests by type of service 2008

2. Current challenges and future development

The cost of providing face to face customer access is obviously higher than other ways to contact and receive services from SSDC. The Area Vision, continues to support locally based offices, ensuring that residents can make personal visits, at a convenient location. A large part of Area North is not covered, although increasing the net costs of this service is not an option in the current budgetary climate.

In addition to the cost of staff, other costs are incurred including rent, utilities, business rates and maintenance.

The costs of each office are being analysed by the Area Support Team Leader and Head of Area Development, against current and anticipated demand from residents. This is to ensure that we maintain a customer focused service based on services that are critical to some residents for example welfare benefits,

The lease for the office in Somerton is currently due for renewal, and requires re-negotiation with the owner of the premises. Discussions are underway with Somerton Town Council and the Lady Smith Memorial Institute to ensure the residents of Somerton can access SSDC services, whilst ensuring this offers value for money.

The Area Support Team Leader is currently discussing with Martock Parish Council a request to provide some form of SSDC customer access at the new Community Office in the Market house in Martock, when it opens in the early Spring 2009.

During 2009 the Area Support Team Leader will also consider further opportunities, in relation to enhancing local access to services, in other settlements. This will not necessarily include face to face access, but alternatives such as public access to internet based services, or information points, which can be supported locally. Members will also be aware of other options used, such as the Information Sessions organised for older people, and plans to publicise services more directly through older peoples groups.

One recent example was to provide Ilton Village Hall with a range of leaflets and information. The Village Hall Committee is keen to develop public use of the hall, following the installation of an Internet connection, as part of the Somerset Broadplaces scheme.

In addition, the current Access Strategy makes reference to the development of the 'Community Hub' concept, and this also relates to ongoing work with Somerset County Council to review future work to support Post Offices and shops.

In conclusion, a small project budget allocated to the Area Support Team Leader will assist in continuing to improve and review the community offices, and develop new opportunities to ensure that residents can access the services they require at places and times that suits their needs.

£2,000 is requested to provide groups or facilities with display equipment and material, and to purchase equipment so that the Community Office staff can work in a variety of locations, in addition to the Community Offices and deliver services where they are needed.

Financial Implications

The uncommitted balance remaining in the Area North reserve is £44,290. By approving the £2,000 this will leave £42,920.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

Aim 1: Deliver well-managed, cost effective services, valued by customers.

Other Implications

The SSDC Access Strategy 2007-2012 seeks to:

- Encourage greater use of cheaper access channels.
- Continue to balance cheaper channels with the needs of specific groups.
- Cater to those for whom English is not their first language.
- Recognise the importance of physical access and invest in improving the already top quartile performance the council is proud to have in enabling 86% of its building to be disability compliant.

Background Papers: *Area Working – Building on our success report - Full Council in Dec 06*
Access to services strategy
Area North Community Offices update report in Dec 07
