

Joint Area North Committee – 25<sup>th</sup> March 2009

## 9. Promoting Local Access to Services – Area North Community Offices

*Head of Service:* Charlotte Jones, Head of Area Development (North)  
*Lead Officer:* Madelaine King-Oakley, Area North Support Team Leader  
*Contact Details:* madelaine.king-oakley@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01458) 257428

### Purpose of the Report

To update Members on the future of the Area North Community Offices and as requested at the meeting in December 2008 to include cost information of each community office.

### Recommendation(s)

It is recommended that Members:

1. Note and comment on the report including proposals for staffing and management of community offices in Somerton, Langport and Martock as noted in Section 3

### Background

At the December meeting of the former Area North Committee, members requested further details on costs of staffing and operating the Area North Community Offices, as part of a current review carried out by the Area Support Team Leader and Head of Area Development (North).

The costs and staffing levels are being reviewed for five main reasons, the purpose being to inform the further development of local access to services:-

- Somerset County Council have ceased funding to support costs of the Council Information Points. This loss of income (£4,575 for 2009/10) needs to be addressed within the Area North Development budget.
- Martock Parish Council have requested support from Customer Advisors in the new Martock Community Office, when the Market House refurbishment is complete.
- Assessment of the long-term financial position of the Langport Community Office in Bow Street. Members have previously indicated that residents may be better served through access to services in a town centre location.
- Joint working arrangements between SSDC and Somerton Town Council, Somerton have altered, with the management of the Parish Rooms passing to St Michaels Church.
- Constant attention to the provision of value for money services to the residents of Area North.

## 1. Current service levels

Location	Provision of Staffing	Provision of Premises
Langport & Huish Episcopi	39.45 hours	Part of SSDC Area Offices at Old Kelways
Somerton	15 hours	Room leased within Parish Rooms, Somerton

## 2. Current costs

The cost of staffing the reception in the Langport Area office is £25,104 per annum, which includes the employer costs. As the reception is part of the Area North Area Offices the additional cost of rent and service charges are part of the overall cost of the Area North Area Office.

The community office in the Parish Rooms in Somerton is open every weekday morning. The cost of staffing is £9,545 per annum, which includes the employer costs. The total rent, council tax, utilities and cleaning costs is currently £6,083pa.

## 3. Current activity to review staffing and property arrangements

**Somerton:** The lease is being re-negotiated for space at the Parish Rooms and a corporate saving of about £3,000 in running costs is expected. There will be an additional benefit of cost and time from the lease changes in Somerton as the council will no longer be responsible for the overall property management of the office.

### Next steps:

- complete lease and form new arrangements in collaboration with other users.
- review customer footfall.

**Langport:** Discussions are taking place with Langport Town Council about a suitable location for a community in the centre of the town, co-located with the Tourist Information Centre.

### Next steps:

- complete review of footfall in existing reception.
- complete discussions on space in the town centre.

**Martock:** The new community office in the restored Market House is expected to open on 14<sup>th</sup> April, mornings only, seven days a week if there are enough local volunteers. The official opening is on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

### Next steps:

- agree suitable accommodation and computer provision.
- trial the provision of an SSDC Customer Adviser for a couple of mornings a week from existing staffing levels.

## 4. Conclusion

As previously reported the footfall figures at the Old Kelways offices are the lowest of all the four main SSDC area office receptions, which may be due in part to its location away from Langport Town Centre, which includes the library and doctors surgery.

Reducing the number of staffing hours from Langport, would allow a similar level of service to Martock, and on a par with Somerton within existing budgets. In addition the timing offered by the review of the locally run Langport Community Office is welcome.

Changing the lease arrangements in Somerton, together with new arrangements in Langport and Martock will mean that all three staffing arrangements are similar, with premises matters being managed largely by the local community. Support will be given to the managing body of each office to ensure the offices continue to tailor services around local needs and demands.

Further work is needed to consider footfall by time of day and day of week and the type of customer service required, with an opportunity to focus on services that are valued more highly by the customer. This will be carried out in consultation within each parish, and other SSDC services, before final proposals are agreed.

The impact of the reduction of income from SCC to support staffing costs, and changes to procedures for issuing concessionary bus passes, is yet to be calculated, and will be completed once local arrangements for Langport, Somerton and Martock are clearer.

## Implications for Corporate Priorities

### Key Target Areas:

- 5.1 Enable the continued development of multi-service hubs (“one-stop shops”) across South Somerset
- 5.6 Increase the % of people who feel informed about the Council and its activities.

## 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 to Full Council, Dec 06*  
*Access to services strategy*  
*Area North Community Offices update report, Dec 07*