

Area North Committee – 22 September 2010

## 10. **SSDC - Community Offices Review And Update**

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### **Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of this report is provide an update on the current position and potential changes for face to face public access in Area North, including SSDC community offices and locally managed Local Information Centres and community offices.

### **Public Interest**

SSDC manages a network of local offices across South Somerset, open to the public for general enquiries and access to a range of SSDC services including housing, council tax payments and benefits. This report highlights some of the main findings of a survey of use and consideration of their cost and value for money to residents, carried out over the last 18 months or so.

### **Recommendation**

Note and comment on the report including the conclusions and planned next steps set out in Section 6 and 7.

### **Background**

One key aspect of the SSDC investment into being a community-based council, is the maintenance of a network of public offices across the district, referred to as Area and Community Offices. In addition the council supports a network of volunteer run centres handling visitor enquiries and providing a range of information and communication to local residents.

In 2007 the Council adopted an Access Strategy, which set out the Council's overall approach to giving good access to its services and its plans to make improvements. The vision for the Strategy is: *"Making Access to Services and information easier through choice and suitability whilst always offering value & quality"*

The aims of the Strategy are:

- To encourage greater use of cheaper access channels
- To balance cheaper channels with the needs of specific groups
- To cater for those for whom English is not their first language
- To recognise the importance of physical access and investment in improving this

### **1. SSDC Area and Community Offices**

Area Offices originally included office accommodation for a range of 'front line' services including planning, environmental health and countryside, while Community Offices are

staffed only by Customer Advisors, often located in shared public buildings. Today, most front line services have relocated to the central SSDC office at Brympton Way, leaving Area Offices to provide the office base for the Area Development team, and often share accommodation with partners.

Customers throughout the district are offered virtually the same service in all the Community Offices as received by phone to the Customer Contact Centre, or across the desk at Area Offices or Brympton Way, with the advantage of talking to staff with local knowledge.

Staff are able to advise on SSDC services, take payments and make service requests, and receive housing and council tax benefit forms. Cash payments are now only received by machines in Petters House, Yeovil and in Chard.

The staffing (including budgets for salaries) for Area and Community Offices was transferred to the Area Portfolio in 2007. Support services costs are provided from Property Services and Information Systems budgets.

Current levels of service are as follows:

Location	Opening times	Direct staffing costs	Direct property costs
Langport and Huish Episcopi – Old Kelways (Area Office). Leased premises from Grosvenor Holdings.	9-5pm Monday to Thursday 9-4.45 Friday  Total 39 hours pw 52 weeks	£25,654 (top of scale including employer costs)	Included within overall costs of Area Office
Somerton – Parish Rooms, Market Place. Occupation Licence with Lady Smith Memorial Institute.	9-12 noon Monday to Friday Total 15 hours pw  51 weeks	£ 9,677 (top of scale including employer costs)	Proposed new arrangements - £1000 rent; £850 service charges, plus broadband link, plus supplies. Est.under £3000 total 2010-11.
Martock - Martock Community Office. Space provided by Martock Parish Council.	10-1pm Thursdays Total 3 hours pw (Pilot basis for 12 months to assess need and demand for local access to services)	£1,935 (top of scale including employer costs)	None (trial only)

## 2. Voluntary and locally managed centres / offices

Local Information Centres (LICs) were established as a brand by SSDC tourism services during the 1990's to support the needs of visitors to the district, helping to promote tourism within the local economy, run by volunteers, with support from SSDC. When established, some LICs operated within Community Offices, others ran from independent premises.

In Area North there were originally two LICs in Somerton and Langport. The Langport Information Centre was originally just a desk in the library, and now has its own premises

in Bow Street, leased by Langport Town Trust. The Links Community Transport Service also shares this office.

In Somerton the LIC was originally directly staffed by SSDC, as part of the Community Office. When its hours were reduced to morning only in 2004, the LIC was taken over by the Somerton Tourism and Heritage Partnership, and currently rents space within an antiques centre in the town centre.

More recently, in Area North, the parish councils of Martock and South Petherton have enabled the development of new local centres for public access to services. In Martock, the refurbishment of the Market House helped create the Martock Community Office and in South Petherton the parish council have leased premises in the village centre for the South Petherton Community Information Centre and Police Post.

Each Local Information Centre may apply for a small annual grant, through a Service Level Agreement, funded by the Area North Grants budget. Four SLAs exist for annual sums between £500 and £750 with Martock, Somerton, South Petherton and Langport. Each centre can receive support, training and published leaflets through SSDC Area Development and Tourism.

### **3. Council Information Points – partnership with SCC**

In the 1990's SCC and the five district councils formed a partnership to provide local face to face access and publications across Somerset. The 'Council Information Point' brand was installed in each of the SSDC Area and Community Offices, with a financial contribution from SCC towards costs of staffing.

Following changes to the SCC approach to customer access, in particular its partnership with South West One, the SCC withdrew from the partnership, and ceased financial support. In Area North this meant an increase of around £4000 to the net budget for staffing to the same levels.

### **4. The SSDC Community Office review**

A district wide exercise was completed in 2009 by the Area Development Managers, to review the costs of delivery, and demand from customers at the five Community Offices (Bruton, Castle Cary, Ilminster, Crewkerne and Somerton) across South Somerset. The results, together with other information was reviewed and established into an Improvement Plan in line with the SSDC Access Strategy and emerging Asset Management strategy.

The recommendations and main findings are set out below, together with some reflection on the implications for Area North.

Based on a sample of 251 responses from customers using the five community offices, a typical customer is a female pensioner who lives in the town, walks to the office and is a regular visitor. The main headlines from the survey include:

- over twice as many customers were women than men, except Crewkerne where 37% were men.
- 46% were 60 years old or over; 39% 30 – 60, 15% 16-29 years.
- 69% had walked to the office, 24% by car.
- Of all visitors 14.8% had a disability themselves; over 42% were carers of which 17.3% were caring for an elderly person with disabilities.

- 98.4% said that staff were good at dealing with their enquiry with only 0.4% saying the service was poor.
- Asked if they felt able to use an alternative means to access SSDC, 15% said they could have used the website, and 32% felt they could have phoned.
- The most significant reason given for using the office in the first place was that it was local and offered a face-to-face service.
- Across a range of enquiries handled by the staff, only 20% fell into a 'core service' – housing, benefits and council tax, streetscene and waste.

### **Community Office Review - Recommendation 1**

*To retain an SSDC face-to-face service for each town but to develop a clear and consistent business model for the information and advice service.*

The review identified that overall the service provided met local needs for an accessible, face-to-face advice and information service although there was scope to improve the focus and delivery to make the service more cost effective. This recommendation formed the basis of the Improvement Plan, which looked at consistency of practice, processes and systems used.

Following the review, in Area North, detailed analysis of customer demand has continued, to assess the best level of service in both Somerton and Langport and to review the outcomes of the trial in Martock. The main distinctive features of Area North appear to be the lower footfall at the Area Office (Old Kelways), together with the opportunities for partnership work with the locally managed centres. In particular the trial at Martock has been successful in piloting the use of the Northgate software over the Internet on third party computers.

Overall, it is felt that current service levels could be reduced without a significant impact, if promoting and assisting with other means to contact SSDC, supporting the voluntary managed centres, and promoting mobile and home based services are implemented.

### **Community Office Review - Recommendation 2**

*The retention of the current network of satellite community office buildings as a council asset is a matter for a property review of fitness for purpose*

This recommendation was formed to assist with the separation of the costs and implications of property ownership from that of customer access to services.

This recommendation is less relevant in Area North, since the office in Somerton is not owned by SSDC. It is accessible and well located in the town. However in keeping with this recommendation a new more cost effective model has been achieved. From April 2010, SSDC has proposed an occupational licence for the opening hours only, and for the space used, this has reduced annual property costs by at least 50% in the current year, to around £2000, with the majority of property services (eg: fire, health and safety) being provided by the landlord, not SSDC.

The main implication of this new arrangement is that the remainder of the space, and time (eg afternoons and weekends) will fall under the direct responsibility of the management committee (and newly formed 'Friends of the Parish Rooms'), making a more flexible space, and promoting greater voluntary involvement in the running of the office.

### Community Office Review - Recommendation 3

*Local, day-to-day information for visitors about the town and for residents about what the town offers, is primarily seen as the role of the Town or Parish Council.*

This recommendation is already in place in Area North, and has been for some time. Somerton and Langport have very successful voluntary groups providing visitor services, together with the new centres in Martock and South Petherton. All four centres are supported significantly by the town or parish councils.

#### 5. Footfall figures and enquiries for Somerton and Old Kelways

Appendix 1 shows demand for core SSDC services at Somerton and Langport from 2007 to date. Core services describe housing and homelessness, streetscene, waste, council tax and benefits.

As part of the Area Support team, the staff working in Somerton and at the front desk at Old Kelways, carry out a range of administrative support to the Area Development team or other services, when not dealing with customer enquiries. This minimises reduced productivity, which could otherwise occur. Staff also assist the central contact centre at Brympton Way by answering phone calls and emails through the website as required.

#### 6. Summary and Conclusion

The findings of the Community Office review have fitted well with other developments and local priorities supported in Area North.

The valuable role of volunteers cannot be overstated in the overall picture of local access to service in Area North. The current network of Local Information Centres appear to offer potential to support local volunteers interested in helping others to find out what the local area has to offer – including the availability of local services.

In addition projects such as the All Saints Hall open mornings in Stoke sub Hamdon, the Community Shop and Café in the Seavingtons, and the many post offices and village halls across Area North provide the means for promoting the availability of local services or act as a base for an outreach worker (for example welfare benefits advice surgeries).

A successful approach needs to recognise the distinctiveness of the provision of and access to local information and advice services in each place. Around half of Area North residents do not live in the four main centres – so different ways of working and greater use of technology available are key to ensure equality of access. The use and availability of technology is changing the nature of how people wish to access services, but this is not always available or suitable for all – which includes particular vulnerable groups. Home visiting and occasional outreach services can be one solution.

#### Somerton

In Somerton, the new arrangements in partnership with the parish rooms management committee will take shape over the coming weeks and months. This has reduced property costs significantly from previous arrangements. Reducing hours (ie staff costs) in Somerton is an option, in the light of reduced demand since the hours were last reviewed in 2004, but at present no decisions have been made.

There appear to be potential benefits, but also some weaknesses, to relocate the Local Information Centre back into the parish rooms. This is local decision between the LIC volunteers, Tourism and Heritage Partnership and town council.

### **Langport & Huish Episcopi**

In Langport, the Local Information Centre's recent relocation and refurbishment has given it a new lease of life. The Town Trust has offered space to SSDC to provide face-to-face customer access. This would require the relocation of the current provision at Old Kelways, with general reception services continuing for the Area Office. This proposal is supported by the Area Development Manager, for a decision by the District Executive, which will be considered in October.

### **Martock**

In Martock, there are no property implications for SSDC, but the trial period of a visiting Customer Advisor for three hours per week is coming to an end. The outcomes will be reviewed with the Martock Community Office Steering Group.

### **South Petherton**

In South Petherton, the centre is continuing to develop its business plan, including the establishment of a constituted group for its management.

In both Martock and South Petherton the Neighbourhood Policing team are using (or intend to use) the centres to promote public access to the service.

## **7. Next steps in Area North**

- District Executive to consider the relocation of public access to SSDC to the Langport Information Centre, in partnership with Langport Town Trust. (Oct 10)
- Complete review of trial period visiting Martock Community Office (Nov 10)
- Complete analysis of demand for existing levels of services in Langport and Somerton to establish required staffing budget and office cover for 2011-12. This may lead to an adjustment of number of hours available for those who require face-to-face support services using the data of footfall for the busiest times. (Dec10)
- Continue to support the development of locally managed Local Information Centres and community offices through the Area Development Plan, in conjunction with SSDC Tourism, Housing and Welfare and Customer Services.
- Continue to promote access to services through alternative means, in line with the SSDC Access to Services strategy.
- Provide support to volunteers and parish councils wishing to increase access to services within existing budgets and work programmes.
- Complete an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) for Community Offices, as part of the Area Development Service EIA.
- Monitor progress of SCC led review of libraries.

### **Financial Implications**

The costs of direct elements of SSDC staffing and premises to the Area North and Somerton Community Office are set out in the table in section 2.

Each Local Information Centre can apply for a grant towards its costs through a Service Level Agreement, of up to £750 per annum.

## Corporate Priority Implications

This review and its recommendations are a direct response to better delivery of the corporate access strategy and asset management policies.

Theme 5 – Deliver well managed, cost effective services valued by our customers.

Aim 5.1 – Enable continued development of multi-service hubs in South Somerset.

## Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

The availability of face-to-face access to the Council, provided in Somerton, reduces the need for people to travel to the main offices at Langport or in Yeovil. Many people who access these services do so on foot. For all people for whom it is suitable, it is more cost effective and carbon efficient for people to use telephone and online services, however, these may never be suitable for all types of enquiry.

## Equality and Diversity Implications

Community Offices are equipped to provide face-to-face, convenient services to those that need them, especially vulnerable people who may not have the capacity or mobility needed to use other channels or to travel to specialist offices based in Yeovil.

**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 ANC report December 2008,*  
*Area North Community Offices Feb 2009.*  
*Community Office Review Report January 2010*

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