

Area North Committee – 23 February 2011

9. Reduction of Opening Hours in the Somerton Community Office (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

For councillors to consider a recommendation to reduce provision of the SSDC community office service based at Somerton Parish Rooms, from five to three mornings a week.

Public Interest

SSDC maintains a network of local community offices across South Somerset, open to the public for general enquiries and access to a range of services including housing, council tax payments and benefits.

This report recommends a reduction in the weekly opening hours at the Somerton Community Office, due to changes in the way residents access services. This will help SSDC maintain essential services that matter to local people, but with less cost to the taxpayer in the longer term.

Recommendation

Endorse the proposed change in staffing hours at the Somerton Community Office from five to three mornings per week by 1st April 2011, and by agreement with the Lady Smith Memorial Institute.

Background

During 2009 a review was completed of the SSDC Community Offices, which recommended the retention of the service, but to concentrate the hours of opening to meet local footfall and types of use.

When cash was accepted in the Somerton office in the Parish rooms there were two full-time staff and the leased Community Office opened every day, five days a week. When cash receipting ended in Somerton there was a reduction to one member of staff, opening the Community Office for 5 mornings a week.

As part of the increased emphasis on services available by telephone and on-line, there is reduced demand for the community office service, increased financial constraints has

also limited the affordability of wholly maintained community offices. However for many residents, local access to SSDC services remains important and well-used.

Report

SSDC currently opens the Somerton Community Office to the public for 15 hours per week (daily from 9 am to 12 noon) in the Parish Rooms. The Lady Smith Memorial Trust has taken on the overall management of the office and SSDC now holds an occupational licence for the Community Office desk. This has reduced the cost of providing this service to SSDC, and provided an opportunity for the community to make more use of the Parish Rooms.

The service is staffed by Area Support Assistants who are part of the Area North Development Service.

The number of customers over the last four years is shown in Figure 1. Some examples of the services provided are: benefits, giving out bus passes, licensing, council tax, environmental health, housing & homelessness, planning, waste & recycling, tourism, heritage & countryside, horticulture & streetscene, taking queries for the town council, issues with County Council.

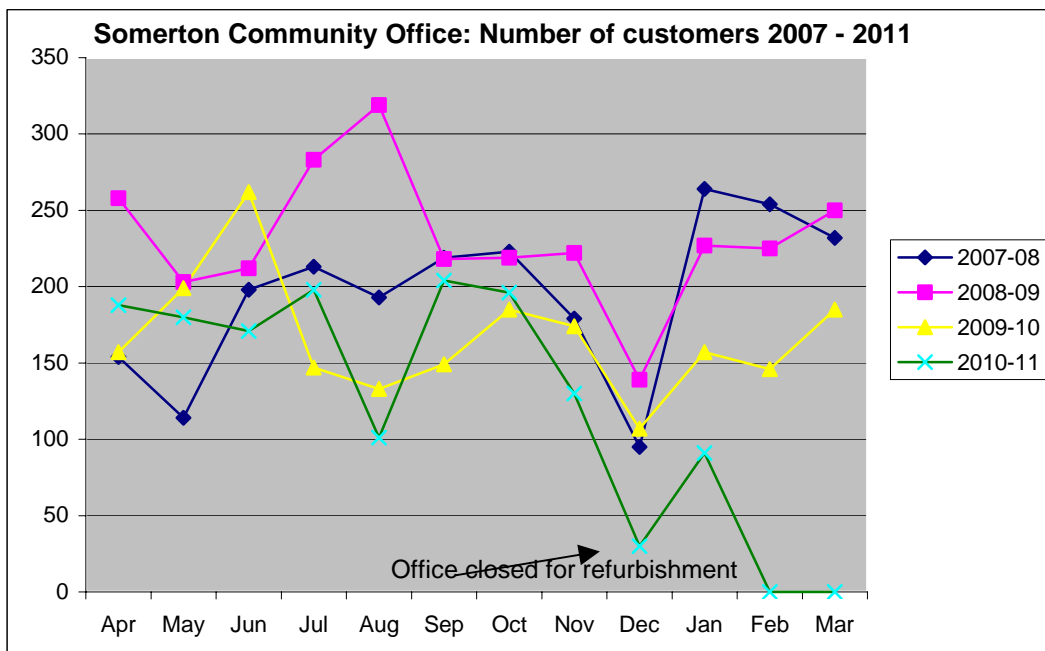


Figure 1

Enquiries to the Community Offices are monitored by the Area Development Service in terms of core and non-core services. Core services are council tax and housing benefits, housing options & homelessness, council tax payments, and waste & recycling. The first two listed are services that are generally provided by a face-to-face service (at all SSDC public offices), for example when documents are required as evidence for benefit or housing claims or changes of personal circumstances. The number of customers who requested the core services since April 2010 until January 2011 is shown in Figure 2, compared to the total number of customer for each day of the week.

Somerton Community office: number of customers Apr 2010 - Jan 2011

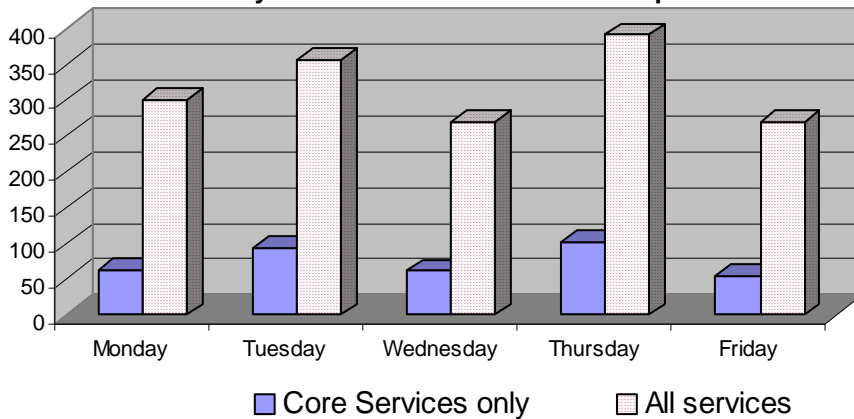


Figure 2

Somerton footfall figures 2010: total by day of week

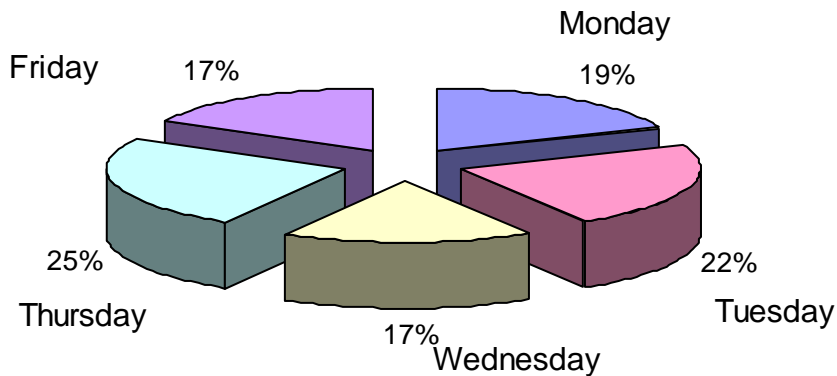


Figure 3

Conclusion

Based on overall customer demand, including days of week most used as shown in Figure 3, the recommendation is to close on Wednesday and Friday each week. Staff and ward members, and the Lady Smith Hall Institute have been consulted on this, and all have indicated their understanding for the proposal. Informal consultation has taken place, particularly with regular customers, and it is felt that any concerns can be managed within the new arrangements.

As part of the equalities impact assessment of this proposal, the recommendation is to avoid closing on two consecutive days, so that any delay to access to services is reduced to the minimum.

During time when there is no customer, the Area Support Assistant will continue to carry out support work for the Area Development team, for example arranging events, helping with local surveys, or administering community grants. At peak times for the SSDC Customer Contact centre, the service assists with taking calls, and from time to time provides emergency cover at other community offices in the district.

The actual contracted hours for staff (currently 80 per week) will not change until a better overview is available for Area North, including use of the Langport community office. There is a current review of how Area Support Assistants could provide a greater level of help with welfare benefits update and advice. Staff will be able to provide a more flexible service to the customers who need it most through pre-booked appointments or attending events.

The Area Development Service will continue to work with Somerton Town Council and the Lady Smith Hall Committee to consider local access to services and the further development of the Somerton Community Office.

Financial Implications

The annual service charge (currently £850) for use of the premises is likely to reduce. Installing a broadband link, and changes to the basis of the occupation at Somerton has reduced property costs to around half of previous costs, now around £3000 per year. The hourly staff cost to provide the Community Office Service (including employer costs) is approximately £12. The approximately annual cost of staffing for nine hours per week is £5500 – a reduction of £3600 from current costs for 15 hours.

Corporate Priority Implications

Theme 4 Ensure Safe, Sustainable And Cohesive Communities 4.16, 4.22
Theme 5 Deliver Well Managed, Cost Effective Services Valued By Our Customers 5.0

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

None from this report.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The main customers of community offices, are older women and carers. Core services requested include those that assist people on a low income. Reducing hours will have an impact on these groups.

The decision not to close two days consecutively was to reduce the impact on those who require face-to-face access to our services. The recommendation is to still maintain a local service for residents who require access to South Somerset District Council Services and reduce the opening hours at times when the number of customers is at the lowest. The change will be communicated to ensure that all who use are aware of alternatives and the new hours.

There is no impact in terms of loss of time to access SSDC services like benefits and housing, as sufficient time is allowed for returning benefits & housing forms, and payments can now be back dated.

Alternative methods for face to face provision will now be possible, for example visits to events or working with partners such as the CAB to provide a greater level of service to those who need it most.