

Area West Committee – 18<sup>th</sup> September 2013

## 10. The Community Offices Update

*Strategic Director:* Rina Singh, Place and Performance  
*Assistant Director:* Helen Rutter/Kim Close, Communities  
*Service Manager:* Kim Close, Area Development Manager (South)  
*Lead Officer:* Madelaine King-Oakley, Community Office Support Manager  
*Contact Details:* madelaine.king-oakley@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01460) 260449

### Purpose of the Report

To inform councillors of the new community office management structure. To update the councillors on the yearly footfall figures across the district and the results of the recent customer satisfaction survey.

### Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has six local offices (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 on 01935 462462 or the web site [www.southsomerset.gov.uk](http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk). 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 June.

### Recommendation

That the contents of this report are noted.

### Background

The community offices are located in Yeovil, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, Langport and Wincanton. As a result of the changes to the community office staff structure, 4 area team leaders and one deputy team leader have been replaced by a Community Office Support Manager (COSM) and a deputy (DCOSM) working district wide (currently 1.8 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) but reducing to 1.5 FTE in October). The COSM reports to the Assistant Directors (Community). There is no reduction in the hours (10.25FTE) of the Community Support Assistants (CSA) who provide the front office service and support for the officers. There are currently 15 CSAs employed across the district.

### The Community Offices

The opening hours were changed this year to offer services at times of greatest demand. They are as follows:

<b>Chard</b>	Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm From 29 <sup>th</sup> September this <b>changes</b> to Monday to Friday 9am to 1pm, 1:30pm to 3:30pm
<b>Crewkerne</b>	Monday to Wednesday & Friday 9am to 1pm, 1:30pm to 3:30pm. Thursday 9am to 1pm
<b>Ilminster</b>	Monday, Tuesday & Thursday 9:30am to 12 noon
<b>Langport</b>	Monday, Tuesday & Thursday 9:00am to 2pm

**Wincanton** Monday to Friday 9am to 1pm

**Petters House Yeovil** Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm

Front desk managed by the Customer Focus Support Manager

**Brympton Way Yeovil** Monday to Thursday 8:45am to 5:15pm  
Friday 8:45am to 4:45pm

The same Northgate software system is used to record requests and take payments in all the SSDC front desks listed above and by the staff who receive public phones calls on 01935 462462. The main SSDC Services provided for our customers are for the following services:

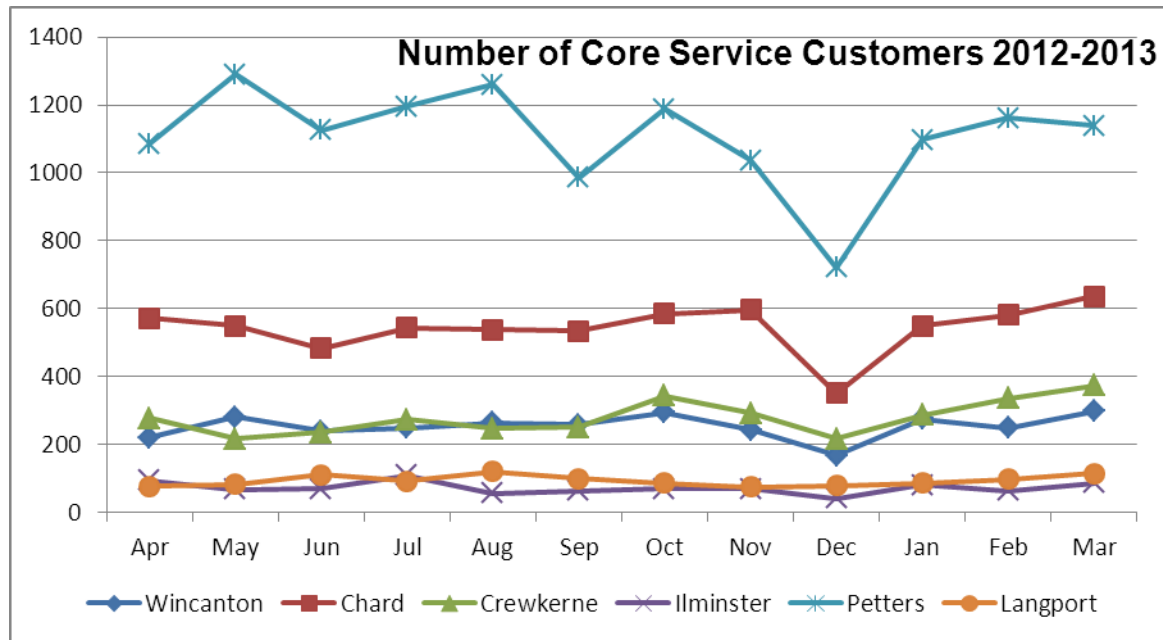
Housing and Council Tax Benefits	Receipt, verification and scanning of applications forms and evidence, general advice and guidance
Council Tax	Advice and guidance on moving in/out of area, discounts and exemptions and instalments plans, processing of payments (debit cards)
Housing	Verification of evidence
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 and from the 1<sup>st</sup> of September the Police will also occupy a desk in the reception area in order to offer a more convenient and accessible service. Initially this will be for a three month trial period. Visitors to Petters House can also access a range of other services including Housing, Welfare Benefits and the HMRC;
- Langport reception is co-located with the Langport Local Information Centre;
- The Wincanton community office is successfully co-located with the Police;
- All offices except Langport have a public computer. These are generally used by customers to register for Homefinder and to bid for social housing properties each week;
- Free phones to internal services are provided in Wincanton, Petters House and Chard;
- 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;
- Reception facilities are provided in Wincanton and Chard for the days that the Somerset County Council Registrar is available.

**Footfall figures**

The following chart shows the number of customers in the last year for every office of the core services; which are Benefits, Council tax, Housing and homeless, Waste and recycling. This highlights the differences between offices, which is now reflected more closely in the opening hours and levels of resource.



**Area West**

The total number of customers at the Chard reception (often referred to as footfall) for the 2012/13 financial year was 13,559 which is a decrease from 14,807 in 2011/12. There was also a decrease at Ilminster from 1,709 to 1,468. Crewkerne increased from 8,576 to 8,713 last year. The highest proportion of work carried out by the CSAs is benefits. Significantly, in the current financial climate, all offices have seen an increase in the percentage of benefit customers. 25% of the CSA’s work in Chard were benefits, a 3% increase from 2011/12. Ilminster was 34%, also a 3% increase. Crewkerne’s percentage was 16%; an increase of 2% from 2011/12, which has the lowest percentage of benefit customers across the district. Crewkerne Town Council now provide financial support towards 40% of the Crewkerne Community Office opening hours ensuring that it remains open on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons.

**Customer Survey**

A customer satisfaction survey was carried out during the first two weeks of June in all of the community offices. 262 responses were received. Despite the uncertainties over the last year, the reduction in Community Office hours last January and the change in management, the team received an outstanding 100% 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, 97% said that the waiting time is Good or Very Good. There is a marked improvement (average of 8%) from last year in all questions where we moved from Good to Very Good.

**Table 1 Comparison of customer responses between 2012 and 2013 for all offices**

		Very Poor	Poor	Neither	Good	Very Good
How welcoming did you find our reception area?	2013	0%	1%	1%	21%	77%
	2012	0%	0.2%	2%	24%	73%
How would you rate your waiting time before being seen?	2013	0%	0.4%	2%	20%	78%
	2012	0.2%	1%	3%	27%	69%
How welcoming were our staff?	2013	0%	0%	0%	14%	86%
	2012	0%	0.2%	0.4%	21%	79%
How would you rate the overall service you received?	2013	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%
	2012	0%	0.2%	1%	22%	77%
How knowledgeable were our staff?	2013	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%
	2012	0%	0%	1	22%	77%

**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 & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

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:** *DX report Feb 2013*  
*Area West Committee Jun 2012 – Services delivered to the Community from our Front Desks 2011/2*  
*Area South Development Update report July 2012*  
*Area East Committee Dec 2012 – Area East Community Office Service – report for 2011/2*  
*Area north Committee Aug 2012 – Area North Community Office Service*