

## Community Offices Update

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### Purpose of the Report

To update Councillors on the yearly footfall/enquiry figures across the district and the results of the recent customer satisfaction survey.

### Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has 6 community offices which enable the public to access a wide range of Council related information and other assistance. This supports the other ways of contacting SSDC, which is by phone or the website. 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 September 2015.

### Recommendation

That Area West Committee members note the contents of this report.

### Background

The community offices are located in Yeovil, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, Langport and Wincanton and are managed by the Community Office Support Manager and Deputy Community Office Support Manager, reporting to the Assistant Director, Communities. There are 13 (9.5FTE) Community Support Assistants (CSA) across the team who provide customer access to services assistance at the 6 Community offices. They also provide administrative and project support to the Area Development teams.

### The Community Offices

The main SSDC services that customers visit our offices are:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 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 instalment plans, processing of payments (debit cards) |
| Homefinder (online social housing service) | Help with accessing the Homefinder service and weekly bidding process   |
| 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/Building Control                  | Hand out application forms  |
| Community Safety                           | Recording incidents   |

## SSDC Community Offices

### Langport Community Office

Situated within the Local Information Centre, Bow Street, Langport, TA10 9PR

Opening times:  
Mon, Tues, & Thurs 9am – 2pm

### Ilminster Community Office

Situated with Ilminster Town Council, North Street, Ilminster, TA19 0DG

Opening times:  
Mon, Tues & Thurs 9.30am – 12 noon

### Chard Community Office

Situated with the Library Holyrood Lane Mill Holyrood, Chard, TA20 2YA

Opening times:  
Mon – Fri 9am – 1pm & 1.30pm – 3.30pm

### Crewkerne Community Office

Situated with the Local Information Centre and Town Council, Market Square, Crewkerne, TA18 7LN

Opening times:  
Mon, Tues, Weds, Fri 9am – 1pm & 1.30pm – 3.30pm. Thurs 9am – 1pm

### Wincanton Community Office

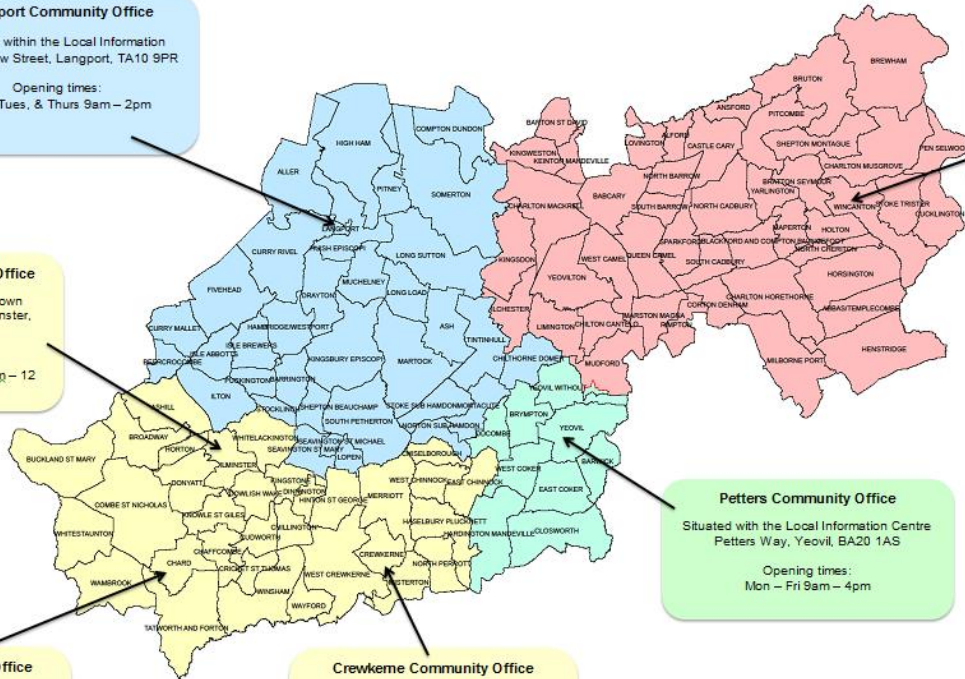
Situated with Avon & Somerset Police, Churchfields, Wincanton, BA9 9AG

Opening times:  
Mon – Fri 9am – 1pm

### Petters Community Office

Situated with the Local Information Centre Petters Way, Yeovil, BA20 1AS

Opening times:  
Mon – Fri 9am – 4pm



[www.southsomerset.gov.uk](http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk)

01935 462462



Not all offices have exactly the same facilities either due to location or number of customers.

- Cash machines are available in Petters House and Chard. Customers can make payments for council tax, parking fines, planning and building control applications.
- There is free public computer and phone access in Petters House, Chard, Crewkerne & Wincanton allowing customers to access online services through self-service or assisted self-service.
- All offices are co-located with other authorities/agencies.
- All front offices have a hearing loop.
- All offices are fully accessible, except for Ilminster where it hasn't been possible to fully adapt.

The community offices provide face to face service and enables customers to receive advice and assistance to many SSDC services, as well as the ability to signpost to other agencies where necessary. They ensure vulnerable members of the community and those who find it difficult or unable to contact the council by other means are able to fully access our services.

As well as the community offices customers are also able to access SSDC services over the phone and/or via the SSDC website. There are a number of services now available online; completing applications, various payment options, reporting issues (including missed waste and recycling collections) and registering to vote. Homefinder applications can only normally be done via the internet.

All CSAs are trained to deal with the wide range of front office enquiries and are able to cover any community office ensuring that full opening hours are maintained across the district. Generally there is only one member of staff on the front desk, but back up support is provided in the busier offices, including Chard, to help reduce customer waiting time.

The Community Support team have access to the online referral system which enables them to refer customers as appropriate to the Welfare Benefits team and outside agencies such as CAB, SSVCA. The Welfare Benefits Advisors provide support and advice to many of the visitors to the front office and work closely with the Community Support team to raise awareness of the benefits that they may be entitled to.

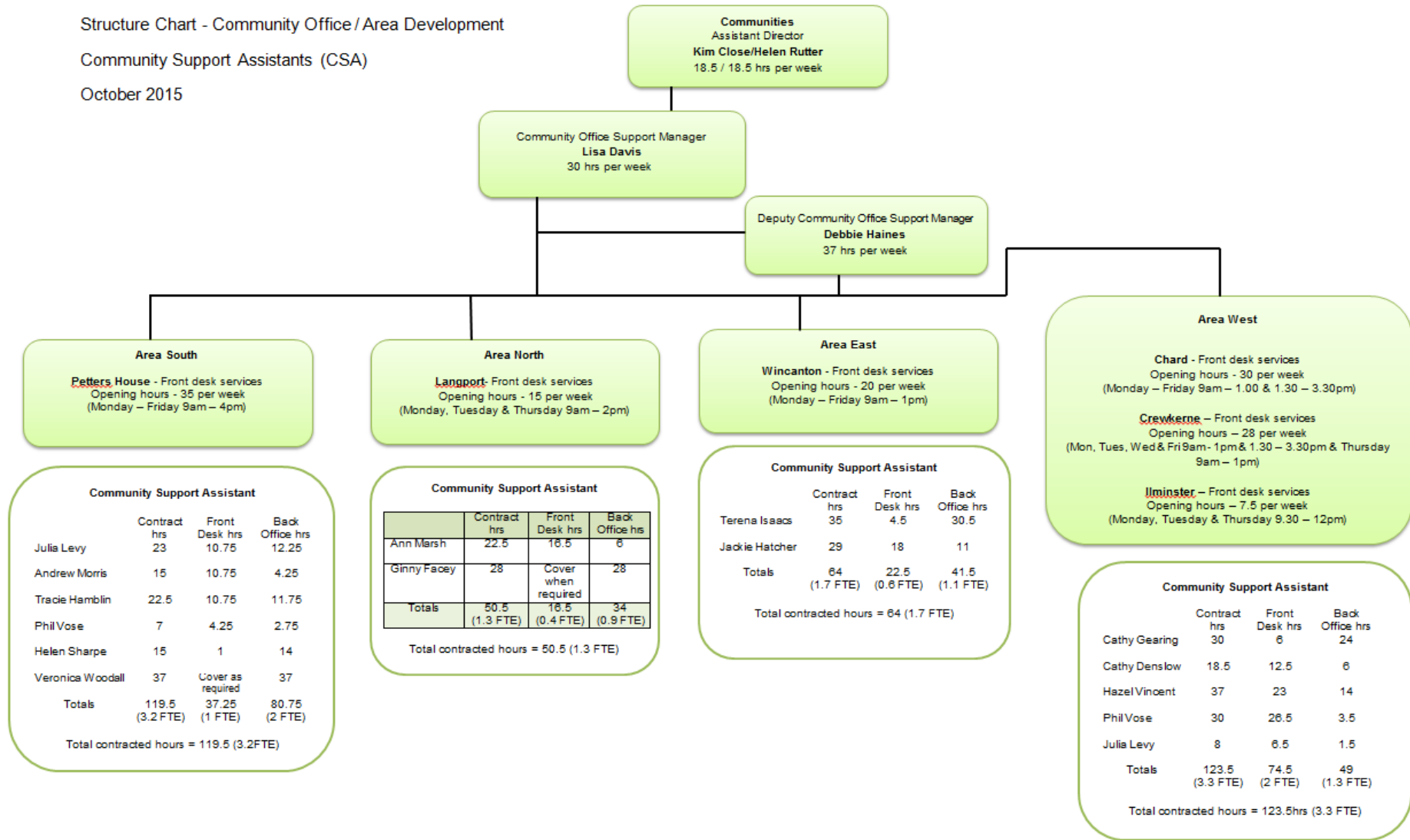
The complexity of enquiries at the front office can vary please see appendix 1 for case studies.

The following structure chart shows the current level of staffing for each area

Structure Chart - Community Office / Area Development

Community Support Assistants (CSA)

October 2015

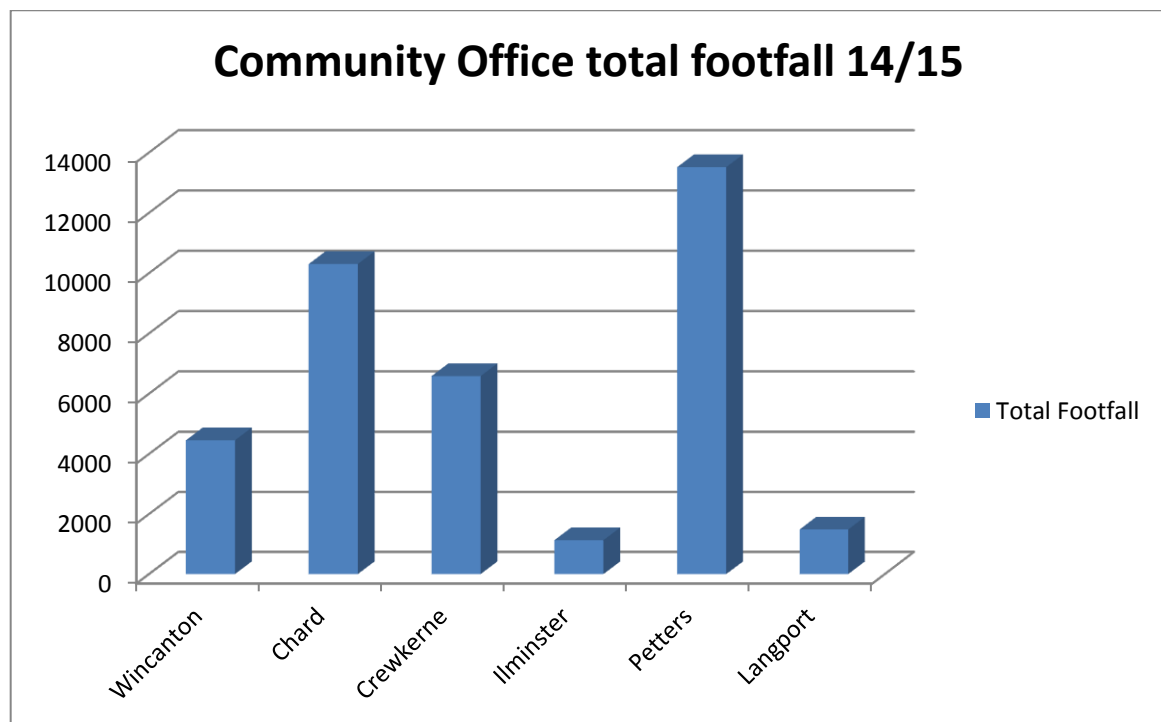


## Footfall figures (Number of customers visiting the Community Offices)

Total footfall comparisons for all Community Offices from April 2012 - April 2015

| All SSDC Community Offices  | 12-13        | 13-14        | % change from previous year | 14-15        | % change in footfall 13/14 - 14/15 |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|
| Benefits                    | 18561        | 15345        | -17%                        | 13560        | -12%                               |
| Council Tax                 | 4270         | 4282         | 0.3%                        | 4250         | -0.7%                              |
| Housing & Homelessness      | 3450         | 2608         | -24%                        | 2306         | -12%                               |
| Refuse & Recycling          | 1882         | 1411         | -25%                        | 1469         | 4%                                 |
| <b>*Core services total</b> | <b>28163</b> | <b>23646</b> | <b>-16%</b>                 | <b>21585</b> | <b>-9%</b>                         |
| Other SSDC enquiries        | 5768         | 4067         | -29%                        | 4206         | 3%                                 |
| Non SSDC enquiries          | 10522        | 8102         | -23%                        | 6832         | -16%                               |
| Reception duties            | 8462         | 6189         | -27%                        | 4848         | -22%                               |
| <b>Total Footfall</b>       | <b>52915</b> | <b>42004</b> | <b>-21%</b>                 | <b>37471</b> | <b>-11%</b>                        |

\*Core services relate to Benefits, Council Tax, Housing & Homelessness and Refuse & Recycling



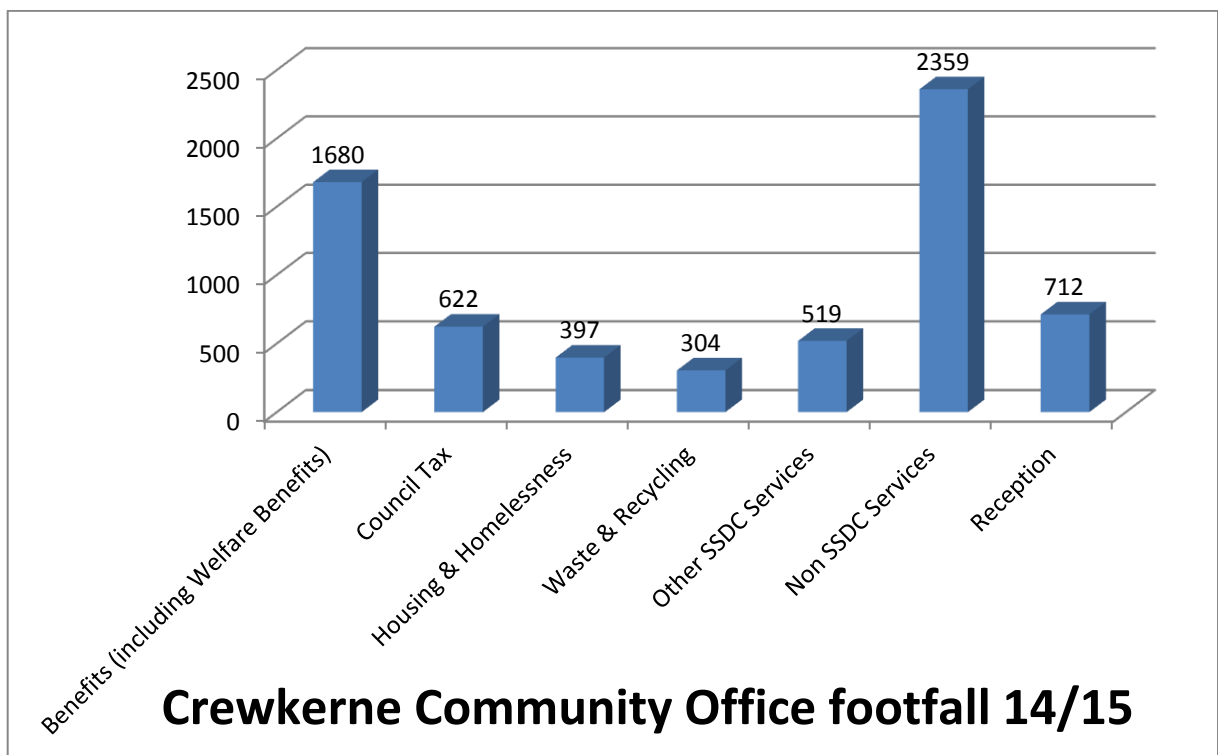
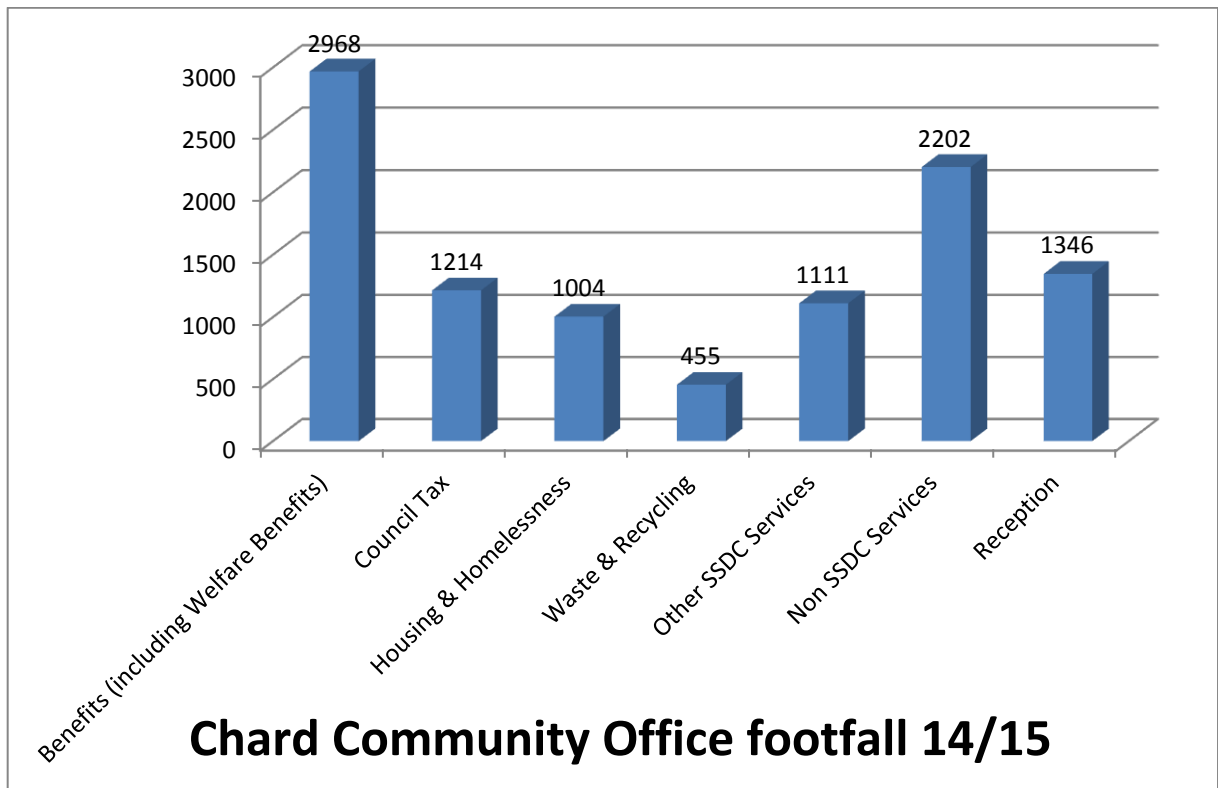
### Total footfall comparisons for Area West from April 2012 - April 2015

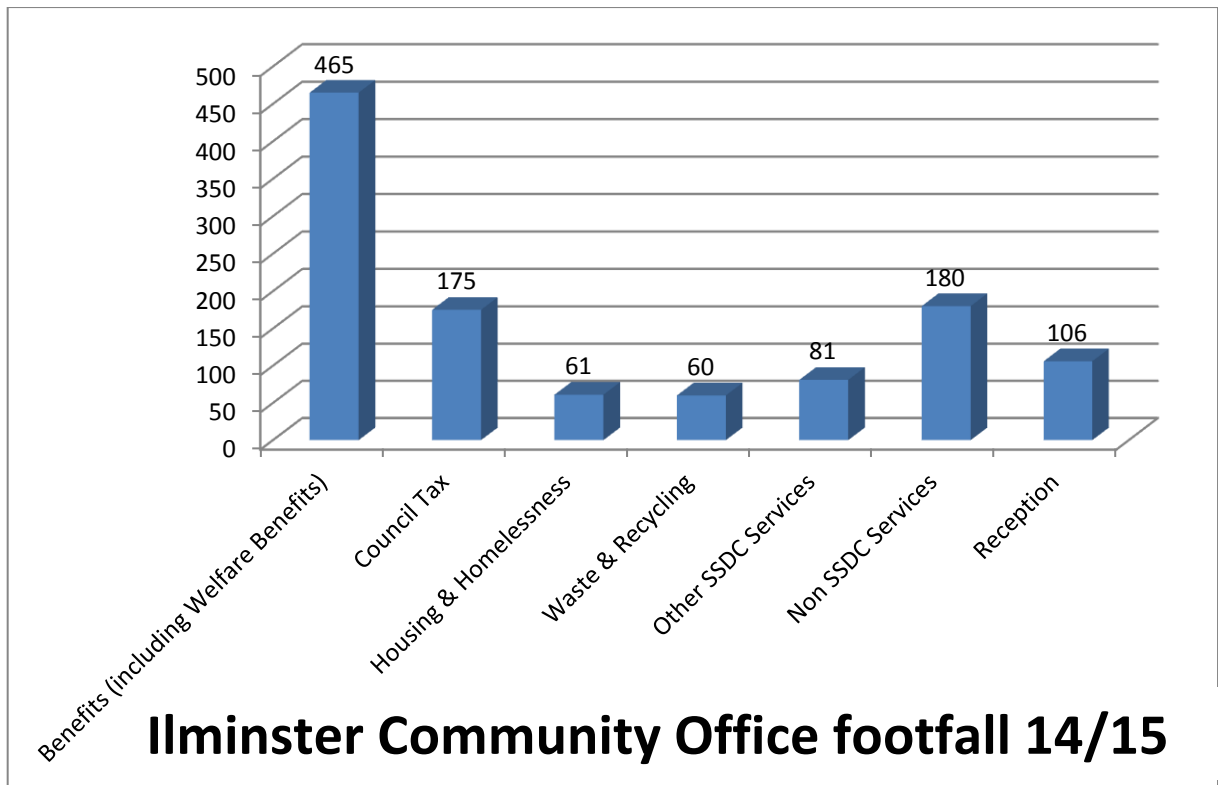
| <b>Chard</b>               | <b>12-13</b> | <b>13-14</b> | <b>% change from previous year</b> | <b>14-15</b> | <b>% change from 13-14 to 14-15</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Benefits                   | 3418         | 3253         | -5%                                | 2906         | -11%                                |
| Council Tax                | 1243         | 1255         | 1%                                 | 1214         | -3%                                 |
| Housing & Homelessness     | 1278         | 1112         | -13%                               | 1004         | -10%                                |
| Refuse & Recycling         | 574          | 466          | -19%                               | 455          | -2%                                 |
| <b>Total core services</b> | <b>6513</b>  | <b>6086</b>  | <b>-7%</b>                         | <b>5579</b>  | <b>-8%</b>                          |
| Other SSDC enquiries       | 1687         | 1317         | -22%                               | 1173         | -11%                                |
| Non SSDC enquiries         | 2968         | 2473         | -18%                               | 2202         | -11%                                |
| Reception duties           | 2391         | 1418         | -41%                               | 1346         | -5%                                 |
| <b>Total Footfall</b>      | <b>13559</b> | <b>11294</b> | <b>-17%</b>                        | <b>10300</b> | <b>-9%</b>                          |

| <b>Crewkerne</b>           | <b>12-13</b> | <b>13-14</b> | <b>% change from previous year</b> | <b>14-15</b> | <b>% change from 13-14 to 14-15</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Benefits                   | 1362         | 1230         | -10%                               | 1322         | 7%                                  |
| Council Tax                | 574          | 611          | 6%                                 | 622          | 2%                                  |
| Housing & Homelessness     | 1088         | 721          | -34%                               | 397          | -45%                                |
| Refuse & Recycling         | 325          | 299          | -8%                                | 304          | 2%                                  |
| <b>Total core services</b> | <b>3349</b>  | <b>2861</b>  | <b>-15%</b>                        | <b>2645</b>  | <b>-8%</b>                          |
| Other SSDC enquiries       | 559          | 633          | 13%                                | 877          | 39%                                 |
| Non SSDC enquiries         | 3679         | 2937         | -20%                               | 2359         | -20%                                |
| Reception duties           | 1126         | 1089         | -3%                                | 712          | -35%                                |
| <b>Total Footfall</b>      | <b>8713</b>  | <b>7520</b>  | <b>-14%</b>                        | <b>6593</b>  | <b>-12%</b>                         |

| <b>Ilminster</b>           | <b>12-13</b> | <b>13-14</b> | <b>% change from previous year</b> | <b>14-15</b> | <b>% change from 13-14 to 14-15</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Benefits                   | 493          | 486          | -1%                                | 462          | -5%                                 |
| Council Tax                | 195          | 177          | -9%                                | 175          | -1%                                 |
| Housing & Homelessness     | 61           | 61           | 0%                                 | 61           | 0%                                  |
| Refuse & Recycling         | 113          | 78           | -31%                               | 60           | -23%                                |
| <b>Total core services</b> | <b>862</b>   | <b>802</b>   | <b>-8%</b>                         | <b>758</b>   | <b>-5%</b>                          |
| Other SSDC enquiries       | 111          | 102          | -8%                                | 84           | -18%                                |
| Non SSDC enquiries         | 286          | 204          | -29%                               | 180          | -12%                                |
| Reception duties           | 209          | 135          | -35%                               | 106          | -21%                                |
| <b>Total Footfall</b>      | <b>1259</b>  | <b>1108</b>  | <b>-12%</b>                        | <b>1022</b>  | <b>-8%</b>                          |

Although footfall has reduced from the previous year the decline is not as significant. It should be noted that whilst increasing numbers of the public are accessing services via the website or telephone the residual enquiries tend to be from more vulnerable people many of whom have complex enquiries which take longer to deal with.





The highest proportion of work undertaken by the CSAs in Chard and Iminster front offices related to benefit enquiries. This is receiving and processing benefit applications forms, evidence and other enquiries.

Staff processed around 400 application forms and over 2,000 of receipted items of evidence at Chard, 170 application forms and 700 receipted items of evidence in Crewkerne and 60 application forms and 300 receipted items of evidence in Iminster.

6531 transactions were completed via the Cash machine in the Chard office.

Chard provides a reception desk for Somerset County Council Social Services, the Registrar and visitors to the building / Stringfellow meeting room.

The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) also provides a drop in service at Chard office, fortnightly on a Wednesday.

Although there is no public computer in Iminster, advisors are still able to assist customers with completing on-line forms.

Crewkerne Community Office received a high proportion of non SSDC related services – this is because the office is situated with the Local Information Centre and Town Council and therefore picks up local related issues ie Tourism enquiries, Town Council enquiries and Somerset County Council enquiries and issues. Please note that Crewkerne Town Council also make an annual financial contribute to the running of this office.

The Area West offices received 48% of total enquiries through the district during 2014/15.



## Customer Survey

A customer satisfaction survey is carried out every year and was compiled in September 2015 in all of the community offices and 467 responses were received.

Customer age group analysis

|       |     |
|-------|-----|
| 16-29 | 27% |
| 30-44 | 26% |
| 45-59 | 22% |
| 60-74 | 18% |
| 75+   | 7%  |

The team once again received a 99% satisfaction score of Good or Very Good relating to the overall service received.

Out of 458 responses 449 customers rated the waiting time before being seen as Good (95) or Very Good (354).

Out of 455 responses 448 customers rated the knowledge of the staff as Good (81) or Very Good (367)

98% of customers said that the CSA had been able to provide the information or help that was needed with the other 2% of customers being referred to another agency.

Comments received from customers on help provided:

*“Excellent, brilliant, superb”*  
*“Very helpful and nice to speak to”*  
*“Very helpful”*  
*“Very helpful, friendly”*

Customers were also asked why they had chosen to call at the office rather than using another office, phone us or use our website.

79% of customers said the offices was near to their home with 6% saying they found it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

Comments received from customers on why the use the offices:

*“I am not confident using a computer or do not know how to access the website on my phone”*  
*“Couldn’t get through to Yeovil by phone”*  
*“Misunderstanding, easier to understand in Person”*  
*“Find it easier to communicate face to face”*  
*“Prefer to deal face to face when providing evidence”*

The results for Chard show that 4% of customers completing the survey would find it very difficult to get to another office, 10% are not confident or do not have access to a pc or website access on a phone and find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

The results for Crewkerne show that 9% are not confident or do not have access to a pc or website access on a phone and find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

The results for Ilminster show 7% find it easier to communicate face to face due to speech, hearing or language problems.

This highlights the importance of local offices for the more vulnerable residents who are unable or find it difficult to contact SSDC online or by phone or who would be unable to access a central office. 100% of customers received the information or help that they needed whilst visiting Ilminster and Crewkerne, and 98% in Chard. The remaining 2% of customers were referred to another agency.

### **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 & Climate Change Implications**

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:** None

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## Appendix 1 - Enquiry examples

### **Example 1**

A non-English speaking lady come to the office and was accompanied by a friend to translate, despite this there were still language barriers.

The lady in question had previously failed to pay her Council Tax and therefore received a summons which had been passed to Ross & Roberts (SSDC debt collectors). The lady had then at this point fulfilled her repayments and the account was cleared.

The lady then received another bill from Ross & Roberts for the same amount and was confused and very upset. Having compared the bills, everything was identical except for a variance on the surname.

I tried to explain to her friend how the error had occurred and reassured them both that nothing was owed but because of the language barrier it was quite difficult for them to understand.

I contacted Council Tax who confirmed the error and said they would get in touch with Ross & Roberts.

I also checked current liability to ensure everything was up to date.

This whole process took about half an hour to resolve but I did manage to reassure the lady that it would be dealt with and she went away happy.

### **Example 2**

A recently widowed lady brought in details of her husband's small private pension. She was hard of hearing and found it difficult to use the phone.

She asked if I could ring and pass on the details, including her email address and mobile phone and explain to them that any communication would have to be done via email or text message if they needed any more information.

Whilst she was in the office I was able to request Single Person Discount with Council Tax, plus knowing that she was in receipt of benefits I explained that she may be able to get help with the funeral costs. I printed and helped her fill in the application form from the Gov.uk website, including a note explaining that she was hard of hearing and could only deal with communication via email or text message.

I also assisted with her moving – ie. arranging for her garden bin to be removed, processing the move on our systems and reminding her to take final readings on electricity and gas meters etc.

She was very grateful for all the assistance given, saying that she felt comfortable coming in the office.