

## **Introduction**

This briefing paper is intended to provide additional information for Members.

It provides information on:

- Current service provision
- The reasons for the decision to close
- Plans in place to help customers
- The impact on HDC staff
- A summary of the reactions to date from customers that have been received by staff

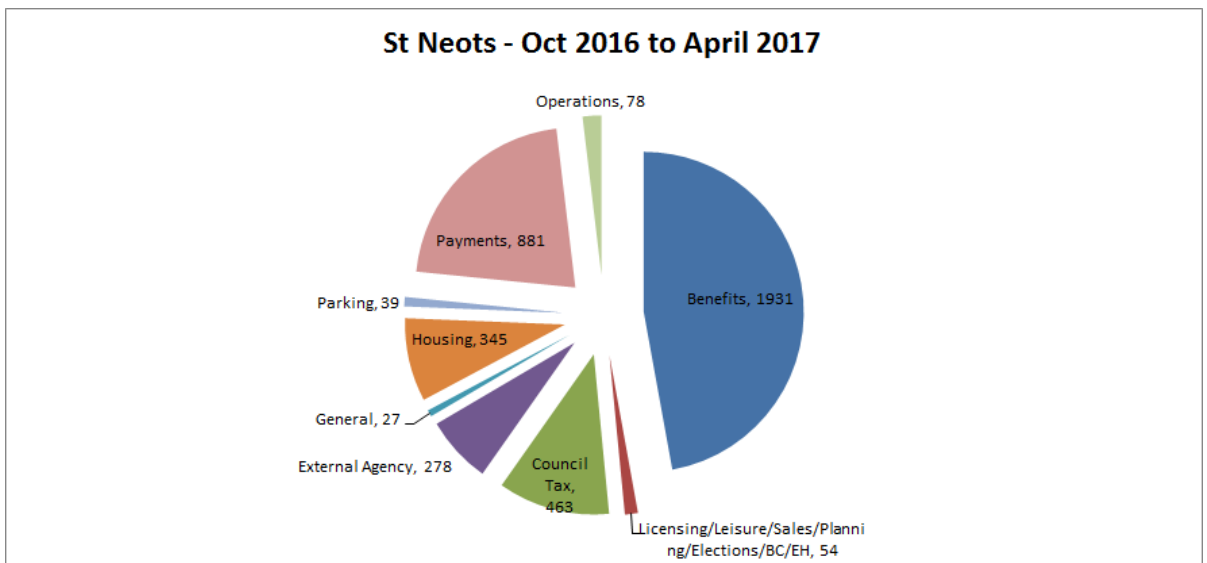
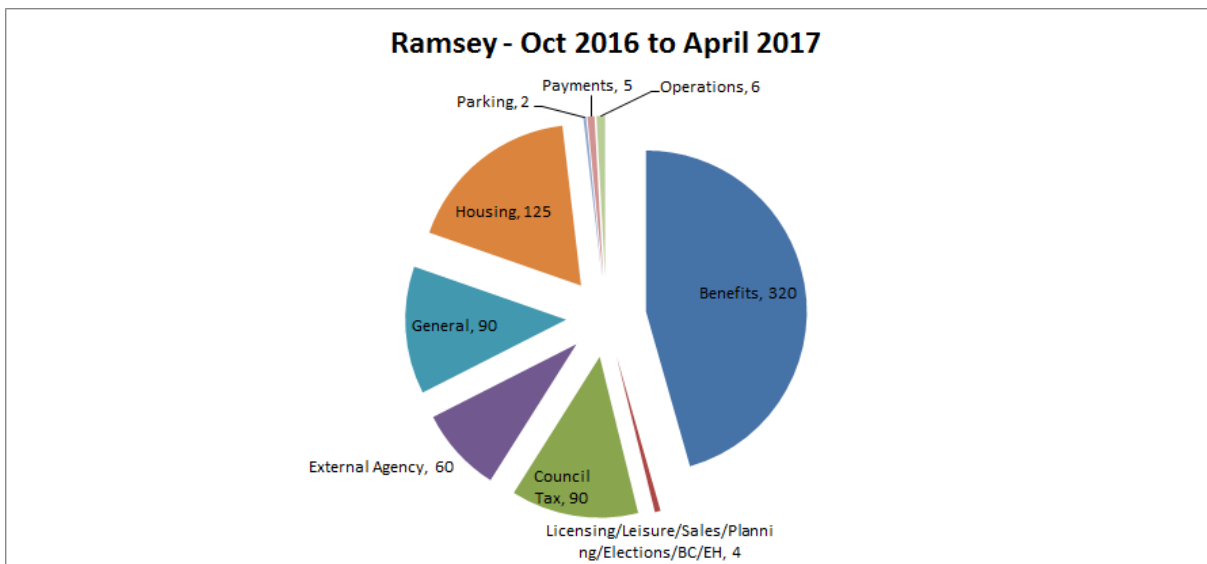
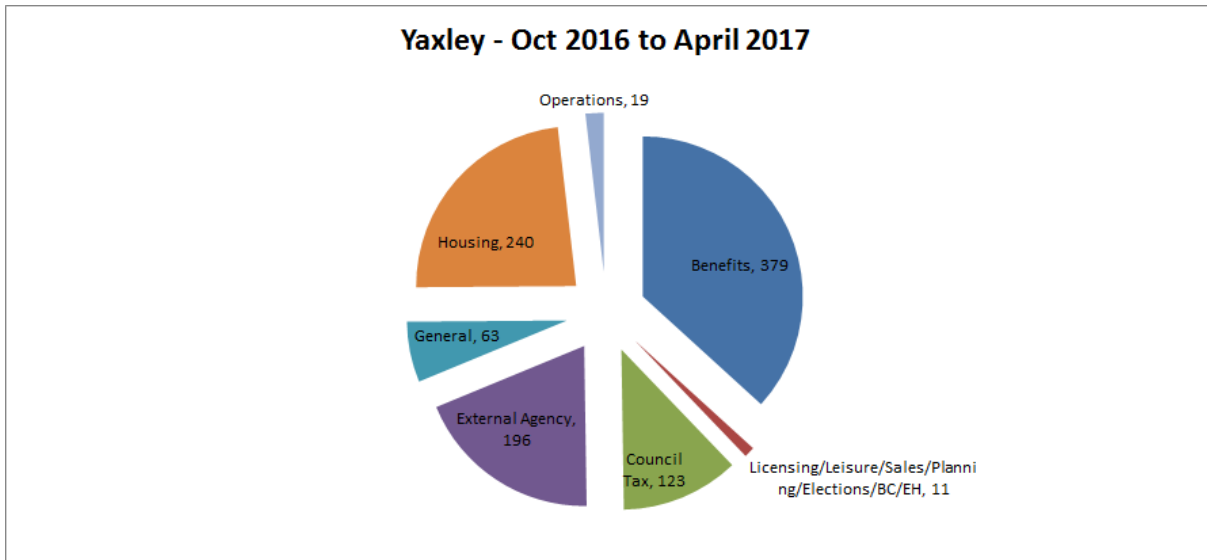
## **Current service provision**

The current opening times and associated costs are:

Location	Opening Days/Times	Building/Operation Costs (£k)	Staffing Costs (£k)	Total cost (£k)
Ramsey	2 days per week	7	10	17
Yaxley	2 days per week	20	10	30
St Neots	9.30-3.30 - 5 days per week	9	38	47
Total		36	58	94

The types of service delivered at each site are shown below. The data presents some valuable insights:

1. At all sites c75% of services relate to housing benefits, council tax and housing.
2. At St Neots there are also a number of customers who are choosing to attend and pay. No other CSC sees this level of payments and this is likely to be a legacy of the previous service being a traditional 'cash office'. This equates to c.25% of visits at St Neots.
3. Customers also attend these sites to access non-HDC services, these are shown as 'external agencies' and include organisations such as Luminus, County Council and Town/Parish Councils. For these services we signpost contact methods but do not provide the service to customers. At Ramsey this equates to nearly 20% of the visits.
4. Other Council services do not see significant face to face contact with customers.



**What factors have driven the decision?**

**Changing customer demand**

Over recent years, HDC has changed its customer access offer, driven by our ‘digital first’ Customer Access Strategy and website enhancements, both of which have been embraced and welcomed by the vast majority of our residents and customers. In addition, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the needs of our customers are driving an expectation of being able to access services 24/7, which in turn is resulting in the need for more of our services to be delivered online, with support for those who require extra help, delivered by telephone or with home visits.

**Volume of use is low and decreasing**

Data is available on the volume of use and the transactions per day, this is presented below.

Visits	2015	2016	% Decrease
St Neots	9538	7842	-18%
Ramsey	1618	1505	-7%
Yaxley	1833	1685	-8%

Site	Avg Transaction time	Transactions per day	Per Hour
St Neots	08:39	27.1	4
Ramsey	08:08	14.3	2
Yaxley	07:26	21	3-4

By way of comparison, the Customer Service Centre at Huntingdon sees 35k visits per annum, which equates to 15 visits per hour

**Customers are choosing to self-serve rather than come to see us**

As mentioned above, like all organisations we are seeing a shift to online service and this is the case for services that traditionally attracted customers to come and see Officers face to face. For example 96% of new Housing Benefit claims are made online, and 76% of changes in circumstances to benefit claims are made online.

Payments were also a service that typically meant customers came to see us. Now we have very few payments made in CSCs – with over 72,000 payments a year being made online, automated or over the phone via the Call Centre. At St Neots the opportunity exists to work with the current customers in the coming months who attend to make payments (c25% of the volume) and help them see the benefits of making a payment themselves rather than coming to see us.

Housing is dealt with via an online portal (Home-Link) with customers bidding on-line and receiving text & email messages about outcomes.

The availability of free-to-use PCs at all three locations in libraries, together with appropriate support from other organisations and volunteers, also encourages customers to self-serve.

**The CSC at Huntingdon is becoming multi-agency centre and Universal Credit will reduce the demand for the HDC Benefit service**

We already have Citizens Advice operating in our Huntingdon Customer Service Centre and expect the Department of Work and Pensions to join us early in 2018. This will lead to the creation of a multi-service hub for the residents of Huntingdonshire – an important step as the transition of Housing Benefits into Universal Credit (a DWP service) from 2018 onwards means HDC will see even less Benefit claimants as the move to Universal Credit continues.

This move to Universal Credit (UC) is significant. This is because c50% of the current HDC Housing Benefit caseload (people of working age) will move to UC and these customers from across the district will have to attend the site at Huntingdon to see DWP staff each fortnight – there is no DWP presence elsewhere.

This alignment of services offers a better customer experience as different agencies can work together to deal with a customer who is on site – rather than merely signposting other services delivered in another building or location.

**HDC alternatives are in place for customers who need to speak to us about our services**

The Call Centre delivers a wide range of services – dealing with nearly 130k calls per year. The team provide an excellent service, dealing with c70% of calls themselves without handing a call over, and a customer satisfaction rating of 90%. The services customers come to see us about are available over the phone.

That said, of course some customers need to see an Officer, especially those who may be vulnerable or elderly. HDC already offers a Visiting Officer service for Housing Benefits (c.500 visits per year). Housing Officers are also mobile – meeting vulnerable clients in their own home or by visiting Temporary Accommodation across the District. Other services offer this capability too.

These services will remain in place, ensuring those that cannot come to Pathfinder House and need to speak to an Officer can access services – whether that's over the phone or by seeing someone 'face to face'

**Other service providers are available**

This is especially relevant in St Neots where HDC has funded the provision of high quality voluntary services from Citizens Advice. The service is available in the town and offers access to a range of services relevant to HDC – with support available for Housing Benefits, Council Tax and Housing matters. Customers can also, with support from CA, contact HDC using a CA phone to seek further information or advice negating the need to travel to Huntingdon even more.

There are also other agencies and charities that can support customers who need support such as Axiom Floating Support and Age UK – these numbers have been added to the "Who Do I Contact" booklet to signpost – so we are also helping customers see other options for help.

### **The caseload – volumes may be falling, but is it becoming more complex and taking longer?**

Assessment of the length of customer enquiries shows the average length of time spent with an advisor remains the same – running at c.7-8minutes. There is no evidence that as volumes have shrunk that more complex enquiries have remained.

However looking ahead we forecast less benefits enquiries when customers move to Universal Credit and we would expect to see visit lengths fall at each location – this is because benefits enquiries take longer than other enquiry types. Estimating the exact nature of the impact is difficult, but halving the average visit time is not out of the question – making usage of HDC staff even less cost effective.

### **Managing the risks for vulnerable customers**

These changes will present challenges for some of our customers, however HDC is committed to supporting them through this as much as possible. The staff on site are experienced professionals and during the period before closure they will work with customers, showing them how to access online services and talking to them about how services available by phone can help.

In addition, they will identify customers who have high needs and therefore likely to require personal contact from our home visitors. The number of vulnerable customers who have no help at all from family or friends is minimal but those who are in this position are referred to the relevant department, which would mainly be Housing and Benefits and they would arrange for the home visit if they were unable to help them over the phone. This is already in place and has been for some time.

We also know that customers from other areas of the district, without access to a service centre, already access services successfully in the way we are proposing to work in Ramsey, Yaxley and St Neots.

### **Impact on Staff**

The staff members at these locations are very experienced customer service professionals who deliver an excellent service and we will be keeping this experience within the team by filling vacancies at Pathfinder House with staff from Yaxley, Ramsey and St Neots. This will retain skills in the service and avoid any redundancies.

### **Feedback from customers**

Staff at each location have been briefed to talk to customers about the closures and to record customer comments. When the customer would like to, a manager from the service is made available to talk to the customer and listen to their feedback. At the time of circulation the summary position for each site is as follows:

- St Neots – 17 customers have raised concerns with staff, and 5 of these have spoken to a manager. The majority of the feedback related to the distance to travel to Huntingdon to see a HDC advisor together with more general comments about provision of public services to St Neots from across the public sector.
- Ramsey – 1 customer comment received to date and resolved by staff. Related to access to Huntingdon from the Ramsey area.

## Appendix 1 – Customer Service Centre - Supporting information for Overview & Scrutiny

- Yaxley – no comments received to date.

In addition a small number of emails have been received by officers and Cabinet Members, totalling c.5. All have had a personal response from the relevant individual – whether that was an Officer or member of Cabinet.