

Chief Executive's - Finance Service Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction – promoting take-up and awareness policy



1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to encourage the take-up of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and to provide a framework within which to promote the service.

The policy forms part of the 'Meeting the Needs of the User and the Community' section of the Benefits Business Plan.

2. Aims and objectives

Increasing awareness and take-up of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction is a crucial element to ensuring that tenants and Council Tax payers can afford to pay their rent and/or Council Tax and receive the government benefits or reductions to which they are entitled.

The main aims and objectives to ensure maximum benefit take-up and awareness include the following.

- Reducing any barriers that prevent benefits being claimed.
- Encouraging take-up of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction.
- Ensuring that everyone who is entitled to benefits or reductions is claiming their entitlement.
- Ensuring that anyone needing advice or assistance can obtain access that service.

The Council has a responsibility to maximise Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and to take steps as appropriate to ensure that any person who may be entitled becomes aware of that entitlement.

3. Barriers to claiming benefits

Some of the known barriers that prevent those who are entitled to benefits from claiming them include the following.

- Lack of knowledge about availability of benefits or how to claim them.
- Concerns about needing to claim assistance.
- Social stigma about claiming.
- Bad experiences about claiming in the past.
- Complicated claims process.
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- Uncoordinated activity between organisations with a shared interest.
- Lack of on-line facilities to download application forms.

- Internet access and digital awareness.

4. Encouraging benefit take-up

The following methods should be considered to promote and encourage benefit take-up.

- Communicating with other organisations to assist promoting benefit awareness.
- Ensuring distribution of information and recognising the importance of providing information online.
- Ensuring advice and information is provided with Council Tax bills.
- Ensuring benefit awareness in periodicals aimed at specific groups of potential claimants – for example, tenants’ newsletters, newspaper articles or adverts and literature aimed at target groups such as pensioners.
- Targeting activity at particular groups - for example, private tenants, pensioners, lone parents, disabled persons or those looking to move from benefits into work.
- Ensuring literature and communications is presented clearly, easily read and understood and customers know where to apply and who to contact.
- Ensuring information is obtained at the first time of asking, to avoid delay and confusion and that customers know how and when to submit information.
- Ensuring that customers who may be entitled to backdated benefit are informed of that possibility.
- Providing a home visiting service to assist with form completion and queries and private interview facilities for those choosing to visit the Council Offices.
- Promoting benefits awareness in areas where the level of service provision is lower and more difficult to provide - for example, in the Islands.
- Availability and access to digital services;
- Information to landlords to increase awareness of benefits available to tenants.

5. Communications with other organisations and services

Effective communication and liaison between other organisations and services should be actively promoted to help reduce the difficulty of claiming benefits and to help maximise potential benefit entitlement - for example, whilst signing up a new tenancy agreement or whilst undertaking home visits to potential claimants. Such liaison arrangements would enable the Council to reach a wider targeted audience than would otherwise be possible and to receive feedback from those involved.

It is the aim of government agencies, such as the Pensions Service and Jobcentre Plus, to streamline the claims process, avoid duplication and to maximise benefit take-up. The Council should work with such agencies where at all possible for the benefit of the customer.

The training needs of other organisation or Council Services should be identified and training provided to ensure that potential customers receive a good standard of advice and assistance. Practical training sessions and written guidance should be provided for reference.

Other interested bodies should be kept informed and consulted about the Council's benefit take-up strategies and encouraged to assist accordingly for the benefit of their members or customers.

6. Providing customer service

Relevant staff, both internal and external to the Council, need to be aware of the availability of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction, and where possible be able to identify other types of benefit that a customer might be able to claim in order to maximise their potential income. This information can be provided by training and guidance materials.

6.1. Finding information

Wherever, and however, the customer first obtains information about the benefits service they should always be able to find out the following information.

- Where to get advice and obtain an application form.
- Who to contact and the available hours of service.
- How to ask for a home visit to complete a form, if required.
- How to submit documents to support an application.
- How to contact other similar benefit or advice agencies.

6.2. Information accessibility

Customers should not be put at a disadvantage that might prevent an application being made or information being sought. The following measures should be in place.

- Availability of interpreters, if required.
- Disabled access to the Council Offices.
- Provision of hearing loops in the Council Offices.
- Treating all customers equally, fairly, without discrimination and with courtesy.
- The use of larger print format where relevant.

6.3. Promoting advice and awareness

Potential customers should be identified and encouraged to make applications for benefit or to seek more information, including the following areas.

- Identifying if backdated claim requests are appropriate.
- Providing advice on levels of potential benefit entitlement.
- Providing information on other welfare benefits and entitlements.
- Provide information on how and where to seek independent advice, including welfare benefits and debt advice, such as at the Orkney Citizens Advice Bureau.
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- Offering the services of a home visit where possible;

- Where customers fail to provide supporting information to support a benefit claim, takin steps to proactively contact them before withdrawing benefit entitlement – for example home visit or telephone call.
- Recognising applications from vulnerable persons, or those with a disability, to assess any additional assistance that may be required.

7. Customer views and feedback

To help identify areas where the benefits service and level of take-up can be improved it is considered that the views of those using the service need to be known. Customer feedback from claimants or organisations is important and can be gathered by seeking views from customer representative groups or by issuing feedback forms or surveys for customers to complete should they wish to do so.

8. Council's website and on-line presence

The Council's website should be the main reference point for benefits information and advice and should contain sufficient information and links to enable customers to make a benefit claim.

Information should be kept up to date and as many forms as possible should be available for downloading electronically for completion.

9. Review and monitoring

To ensure the effectiveness of any benefit take-up strategies, and quality of service, all methods deployed should be monitored and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure that practices and procedures can be amended wherever possible.

Policy adopted 14 February 2006 at a meeting of the Council's Policy and Resources Committee.

Document Reviewed – August 2018.