

Chief Executive's - Finance Service Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction – Right Time (processing times) Strategy



1. Introduction

The Council has set out its objectives and targets, in relation to the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction service, in its Business Plans for the Benefits service and Fraud Prevention and Investigation.

The Right Time Strategy forms part of the Delivering Outcomes section of the Benefits Business Plan. One of the key objectives is to ensure that claims administration is fast, secure and accurate. The speed of processing New Claims and Changes of Circumstances is also referred to as The Right Time indicator.

The time taken to process benefit claims can be measured in processing days and provides benefits management and customers with information to assess the effectiveness of this process. The setting of performance targets and the monitoring process can assist in identifying any problem areas such as delays in obtaining information or backlogs of work.

The Right Time Strategy is aimed at complimenting the overall business plan and providing an overview as to how this can be achieved and monitored.

2. Claims Administration

2.1. Ensuring the correct completion of claim forms

Measures that should be taken include the following.

- Ensuring staff who complete forms have a sound knowledge of the information that is required to support an application form.
- Ensuring that organisations such as the Council's Housing Services or Orkney Housing Association Limited can assist in their tenants to submit benefit application forms.
- Providing clear guidance notes to assist benefit applicants.
- Monitoring the reasons for incorrectly completed benefit claim forms.
- Providing different benefit claim forms for different customer groups.

2.2. Processing a New Claim

The following measures should be considered as good practice:

- To action a claim within 5 working days of receipt – ensuring that requests for additional information is requested where required.
- To process a claim within 5 working days as soon as all information has been received to determine the claim.

- To fast-track the processing and determination of New Claims – within 3 working days - where the applicant has submitted all information at the first point of contact.
- Ensuring that a tenant's rent account and Council Tax accounts are set up as quickly as possible to minimise delays.
- Ensure all mail is copied where appropriate and original documents returned within one working day.

2.3. Processing Changes of Circumstances

The following measures should be considered as good practice:

- To process a claim as soon as all information has been received to determine a claim.
- Ensuring that where the information provided is incomplete, that this is identified as quickly as possible and additional information is requested.
- Ensure that priority changes, such as claim cancellations and change of address notifications, are processed as quickly as possible to minimise overpayments.
- Tenancy change notifications from the Council's Housing Services or Orkney Housing Association Limited should be processed without undue delay.
- Ensuring the prioritisation of information that requires a new decision to be made.

2.4. Gathering information

The following steps should be followed where additional information is required to complete an application:

- Ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions Customer Management System is accessed as soon as possible to confirm or obtain details of benefits that are in payment, such as Income Support, Universal Credit or Tax Credits.
- Consider options of contacting the customer by phone, text, email (taking into data protection and security issues) or home visit in the first instance;
- Contact the customer as soon as possible and request that information is returned to the Council within 7 days.
- Making use of Diary entries on the Council's Northgate software system to follow up requests for further information if not received within 7 days.
- Ensuring the customer is advised that the application may be withdrawn within one month if required information is not provided.
- Ensuring that the suspension of claims does not act as a deterrent to customers reporting changes of circumstances, with each case being considered on its own merits.
- Ensure that all available information is gathered to communicate with customer, such as telephone, mobile numbers or email addresses.
- Where appropriate, ensure that Rent Officer decisions are received on time.

3. Backlogs of outstanding work

Backlogs of outstanding benefit applications, or changes of circumstances, can have an adverse effect on processing times and in turn affects the longer-term prospect of improving performance. The reasons for a backlog need to be understood if corrective action is to be taken.

3.1. Anticipating backlogs

Backlogs can happen for a variety of reasons but can quite often be anticipated. Measures need to be in place to identify, anticipate and deal with a backlog. The following factors within the Benefits team present a higher risk of potential backlogs.

- Personnel and staff issues including staff turnover, holidays, sickness, maternity leave and training. With a small team these issues can have an adverse effect on processing times.
- Peak periods of workload including the Annual Benefit uprating and processing of revised annual determination letters.
- Increases in benefit caseload.
- Changes to legislation or government policies, such as welfare reforms or additional Audit requirements such as HB Count.

3.2. Identifying backlogs

The following measures can be used to identify backlogs.

- Close monitoring of key performance indicators, such as the time taken to process new claims or change of circumstances.
- An increase in the number of customer queries due to delayed benefit awards or payments.
- Visual evidence that work is accumulating.

3.3. Preventing and dealing with backlogs

The following measures can be used to prevent and deal with backlogs.

- Anticipating that backlogs may occur and taking preventative action - for example, reallocating the workload due to staff taking annual leave or prioritising outstanding work.
- Ensuring all staff have the training and experience to assist in reducing a backlog.
- Monitoring all aspects of the claims administration process to enable processing times and systems to be reviewed and improved.
- Regular monitoring and recording of performance during team meetings.
- Prioritisation of the workload – such as dealing with all new claims or changes as quickly as possible and managing the backlog over a longer period of time, or linking specific types of claims together to speed up processing in a specific area.
- Advise affected parties such as tenants or landlords and consider publicity if appropriate.

4. Monitoring Performance

The following performance measures should be put in place:

- Recording Right Time performance indicators and setting targets.
- To monitor requests for further information to ensure that appropriate requests for additional information are being made.
- To monitor and ensure the methods being used to gather information are the most appropriate and the quickest.
- To monitor that the customer is being asked to return information within the appropriate timescales.
- To record the reasons for performance related issues and discuss solutions that can be put in place;
- To publicise and make available performance processing times;
- Ensuring that performance is monitored and reported in accordance with the Benefits Business Plan.

5. Review of the Strategy

The Strategy should be reviewed on a yearly basis.

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