

# Chief Executive's - Finance Service Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction – User Focus and Partnership Working



## 1. Introduction

The Council has set out its objectives and targets in relation to the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction service in its Benefits Business Plan. This User Focus and Partnership Working strategy forms part of the 'Meeting the Needs of the User and the Community' section of the Benefits Business Plan and aims to set out how this can be achieved.

The customer should be the focus of the benefits administration process and the Council should be looking to continuously improve the service provided to its customers.

Working with other organisations can help to provide a more efficient and effective services. Good communications, liaison and understanding are required to help improve the service to the customer.

## 2. Accessibility to the benefits service

The service that the Council's Finance - Benefits Section provides should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that it meets customers' needs with regard to the availability of services, the level of service provided and the ease of access to services.

The Council's Benefits Section provides a face-to-face service for customers at the Council Offices, Kirkwall. Customers can contact the Council Offices during all opening hours of the Council Offices without prior appointment. Private interview facilities are available and home visits, including out of hours visits, can be arranged by appointment for those who are not able to visit the Council Offices in person.

The provision of information, advice and application forms is also maintained on the Council's website at <http://www.orkney.gov.uk/>.

If required, the views of customers, or relevant customer representative groups, can be sought through the Council's agreed consultation process, which may include, for example, the use of customer surveys.

## 3. Benefit take-up and awareness

A policy for the promotion of the benefits service – including a take-up strategy - was approved by the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 14 February 2006 and is reviewed on a regular basis. The policy can be viewed on the Council's website at [http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan\\_2.htm](http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm).

## **4. Working with other organisations**

Building working relationships with other organisations or stakeholders can help provide improved services and systems for the benefit of the customer. Within the benefits service there are many key stakeholders who play a key role in delivering the benefits service.

Service Agreements should be adopted where possible to strengthen the working relationship and should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Attendance at meetings with other organisations can help to increase awareness of services provided, provide a forum for discussion and exchange of information, provide training opportunities and gain or enhance knowledge amongst.

From 2012 the United Kingdom government has embarked on a major and ongoing programme of welfare reforms that continues to impact upon the future of benefits service delivery. Liaison and consultation with stakeholders helps to enhance and manage this change process – for example, a Social Security/Welfare Reform Working Group meets under the auspices of The Orkney Partnership to help implement and provide information on the wide range of welfare reforms being introduced. A sub-group called the Housing Operational Group also meets to discuss the specific impact of reform on housing landlords in the social sector.

## **5. Working with Landlords**

Communicating effectively with landlords can help to promote an understanding of the benefits service and help to encourage changes to be reported to the benefits service – for example.

- Encouraging landlords to contact the benefits service before taking enforcement action for collection of rent arrears when the arrears are due to a delay in the payment of Housing Benefit.
- Providing training to Council Housing staff and Orkney Housing Association Limited employees to assist with the completion of benefit forms, verifying claims, reporting changes of circumstances and the impact of welfare reforms.
- Regular meetings with the Council's rent arrears team to highlight benefit related issues.

## **6. Building and maintaining partnerships with stakeholders**

### **6.1. Stakeholders of the benefits service include the following.**

- Benefit claimants.
- Private Landlords.
- Orkney Housing Association Limited.
- Orkney Islands Property Development Limited.
- Orkney Islands Council - Housing Services.
- Orkney Islands Council – Orkney Health and care Services.

- Department for Work and Pensions - including.
  - Counter Fraud and Compliance Directorate.
  - The Pensions Service.
  - Jobcentre Plus.
- Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs.
- Her Majesty's Appeals Tribunal Service – Housing Benefit Appeals.
- Council Tax Reduction Review Panel.
- The Council's debt recovery collection collections partners, including the Sheriff Officer.
- Orkney Citizens Advice Bureau.
- The Social Security / Welfare Reform Working Group – under the auspice of the Orkney Partnership.

## **6.2. Maintaining partner relationships**

Developing and maintain relationships with stakeholders can include the following measures.

- Providing accurate and up to date information on the Council's website.
- Providing articles and publicity through tenants' newsletters.
- Publicity through local press.
- Utilising existing platforms such as the Council's Landlords' Forum.
- Landlord meetings.
- Promotion and awareness of the benefits appeal processes and the Council's complaints procedures.
- Joint working opportunities to maximise benefit take-up, fraud prevention and detection.
- Promotion of shared services where possible and appropriate;
- Undertaking customer and landlord surveys/consultations to obtain information on how service is performing and how improvements can be developed.
- Joint training and awareness opportunities with interested parties.

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