

Chief Executive's - Finance Service Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction – Business Plan 2018 to 2019



1. Introduction

The Council's Chief Executive's Service – Finance - Revenues & Benefits Section is responsible for administering Housing Benefit (on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions) and Council Tax Reduction (on behalf of the Scottish Government).

This business plan sets out the aims and objectives of the Revenues and Benefits Section in relation Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and provides key targets against which performance can be measured and monitored.

2. Benefits Service – structure and aims

2.1. Reporting structure within the Council

The Council's Revenues and Benefits team operates under the following structure.

- Chief Executive's Service.
- Finance Service.
- Revenues and Benefits Section.

2.2. Principal aims of the service

- Maximise benefit awareness and take-up.
- Assess benefit claims promptly and accurately.
- Prevent, detect and pursue benefit fraud.
- Minimise overpayments of benefit.

3. Business Planning and reporting

3.1. The Council Plan

The Council Plan 2018 to 2023 is a high-level plan that sets out the Council's strategic priorities, developed together with the Orkney Community, over the next five years. A copy of the plan is available on the Council's website at <http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Council/C/corporate-strategic-plan-2018-2023.htm>. The Council's strategic priorities are.

- Connected Communities.
- Caring Communities.
- Thriving Communities.
- Enterprising Communities.
- Quality of Life.

3.2. Chief Executive's Service – Service Plan

The Chief Executive's Service – Service Plan 2016 to 2019 shapes the work of the Service. A copy of the plan is available on the Council's website at

<http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/Performance/council-service-plans.htm>.

The main outputs of the plan are.

- Council Plan Targets.
- Service Action Plan.
- Service Performance Indicators.
- Service Risk Register.

3.3. Finance Service - Benefits Business Plan

The Finance Service – Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Plan 2018 to 2019 shapes the work of the benefits team in the following areas.

- Business planning and reporting.
- Performance reporting.
- Meeting the needs of the user and the community.
- Delivering outcomes.

A copy of the plan is available on the Council's website at

http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

4. Performance Reporting

4.1. Purpose of performance reporting

Regular reporting of performance is an essential component of service delivery and provides an opportunity to.

- Challenge under performance.
- Recognise and give credit where performance meets or exceeds expectations.
- Gain assurance that the service is operating effectively, efficiently and economically.
- Monitor performance and trends.

4.2. Performance monitoring measures

The following performance recording and monitoring measures for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction are in place.

- Recording and monitoring of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction performance measures on a monthly and quarterly basis.
- Regular team meetings to provide business updates, including performance.
- Providing quarterly detailed performance analysis reports to the Revenues and Benefits Team and the Head of Finance.

- Monitoring and reporting of Chief Executive's Service Performance Indicators, in accordance with the Chief Executive's Service – Service Plan.
- Provision of monthly statistical performance data for Housing Benefit to the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Provision of monthly statistical performance data for Council Tax Reduction to the Scottish Government.
- Audit Scotland review as part of their Housing Benefit Risk Assessment programme to determine the extent to which the benefit service is meeting its obligations to achieve continuous improvement.
- Audit Scotland certification of the annual Housing Benefit subsidy to ensure that the Council's administrative systems, procedures and key controls for awarding benefits operate effectively and that the Council has taken reasonable steps to prevent and detect fraud.
- Internal audit review of benefit of administrative systems and procedures.

4.3. Performance analysis reports

Detailed performance analysis reports are prepared in relation to the following aspects of benefit delivery.

- Speed of processing.
- Interventions.
- Quality and Accuracy.
- Appeals and reconsiderations.
- Benefit Overpayments.
- Benefit Fraud.
- Benefits - Miscellaneous Performance.
- Housing Benefit subsidy analysis.

5. Meeting the needs of the user and the community

5.1. Providing an effective and efficient benefits service

Essential components of an effective and efficient benefits service include.

- Encouraging benefit take-up and awareness.
- Providing customers with easy access to skilled and knowledgeable staff.
- Taking account of the needs of the local community.
- Managing customers' expectations when things go wrong.

5.2. Benefits Take-up and awareness policy

A policy for the promotion of the benefits service was approved by the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 14 February 2006 and should be reviewed at regular intervals. The policy can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

5.3. Benefits User Focus and Partnership Working

The customer should be the focus of the benefits administration process. In addition, 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.

The Council has set out how this can be achieved in the User Focus and Partnership Working document that can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

The Council's website is also the focus of providing customers with detailed information on the benefits service, including application forms and can be viewed at the following weblink <http://www.orkney.gov.uk/>.

6. Delivering outcomes

Effective operational processes and systems, along with skilled staff are one of the main aspects of delivering sound performance and continuous improvement.

6.1. Claims Administration

The process of benefit claims should be fast, secure and accurate. The speed of processing New Benefit Claims and Changes of Circumstances is also referred to as 'The Right Time'. A Right Time plan sets out how this will be achieved and can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

6.2. Quality Assurance

The service is committed to the principle of paying the right benefit, to the right person, every time – delivering prompt, accurate, secure payments and advice to customers, providing them with an efficient and informed Benefits Service. An effective quality checking regime helps prevent error entering and affecting the HB caseload, providing assurance on the following.

- integrity and security of benefit processes.
- quality of work.
- requirement for staff training and development.
- identification of process weaknesses.

A Quality and Accuracy plan sets out how this will be achieved and can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

6.3. Interventions

To minimise error in the benefits caseload the Council must encourage customers to report changes of circumstances on time and have a robust intervention programme to identify changes and take appropriate corrective action. Systems need to be in place to make sure payments are adjusted as circumstances change and ensuring that there are sufficient safeguards to keep benefit payments right, by setting in-

claim case controls to manage predictable changes and making the most of data and intelligence. An Intervention and Right Benefit plan sets out how this can be achieved and can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefits-Business-Plan_2.htm.

6.4. Overpayments

To protect public funds, the Council must ensure that overpayments are minimised and that, when they do occur, they are correctly classified and rigorously recovered. A Housing Benefit Overpayments Recovery policy was approved at a meeting of the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 14 February 2006 and is reviewed in a regular basis and can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/O/Overpayments_2.htm.

6.4.1. Debt Recovery and Write-off Policy

A Debt Recovery and Write-off policy was approved at a meeting of the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 23 June 2009 and is reviewed on a regular basis and can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/O/Overpayments_2.htm.

Where debt remains unpaid and cannot be recovered from ongoing benefit or by other methods, Sheriff Officers will be used in accordance with the debt recovery policy.

6.5. Appeals and requests for re-determination of decisions

Customers who disagree with the Council's decision on the manner in which their benefit application is processed have a right to request the claim to be reconsidered, and to appeal against the decision.

6.6. Counter-fraud

The prevention and investigation of fraudulent claims are important aspects of a secure and effective benefits service. A separate Fraud Prevention and Investigation Business Plan sets out the Council's approach to delivering a counter-fraud service and includes detailed key performance indicators and targets. This can be viewed on the Council's website at http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/B/Benefit-Fraud_2.htm.

6.7. Maintaining skilled employees

Staff should receive appropriate and adequate training to ensure that they can perform the duties asked of them and to enable them to meet the aims of a fast, secure and accurate benefits service.

- A Revenues Training Strategy was approved by the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 21 November 2006 and should be reviewed on a regular basis.
- A Staff Contingency plan is in place, aimed at ensuring that critical absences are managed effectively and to ensure that sufficient resources are available to carry out all key benefits service activities.

- Regular staff meetings should be held to discuss issues that arise, such as new legislation, procedural changes, developments and performance.
- The Council's corporate Employee Review and Development process will ensure that all employees receive at least an annual staff appraisal.

7. Welfare Reform

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. These include.

- The abolition of Housing Benefit for working age claimants and the introduction of Universal Credit.
- From September 2018 no new claims for working age claimants will be accepted for Housing Benefit.
- From 2019 to 2023 existing claimants of legacy benefits for working age claimants, including Housing Benefit will transfer to Universal Credit.
- Discretionary Housing Payments is now a devolved payment administered by the Council on behalf of the Scottish Government and will continue to mitigate against the impact of the removal of the spare room subsidy for Housing Benefit or the housing cost element of Universal Credit.

The creation of a Scottish Social Security Agency to administer devolved benefits is also ongoing but will have a lesser impact on the administration of Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction.

Liaison and consultation with stakeholders helps to enhance and manage this change process. 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.

8. Legislation

- Housing Benefit is a statutory service provided under the Social Security Administration Act 1992.
- Council Tax Reduction is a statutory service provided under the Council Tax Reduction (Scotland) Regulations 2012.

9. Review of the Business Plan

The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Business Plan should be reviewed on a yearly basis.

Document Reviewed - August 2018.