

HOUSING/COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT AND OTHER WELFARE BENEFITS
TAKE-UP STRATEGY

Introduction

Wear Valley District Council is committed to ensuring that the residents of Wear Valley are aware and receive their correct entitlement to Housing and Council Tax Benefits and other Welfare Benefits.

It is important that the gateway to claiming and receiving Housing and Council Tax Benefit remains secure in order to minimise fraud. However, where benefits are properly due, it is important that the council plays a key role in maximising the incomes of its residents to encourage social inclusion and contribute towards the Council's objectives.

The Benefit Service provides additional income to eight and a half thousand households within the Wear Valley area where deprivation and unemployment levels within some of its communities remain above the national average. These claimants total 29% of the 29,000 households in the district.

This strategy sets out the aims and objectives of the Benefits Service, in encouraging take-up of Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and other benefits, and the Take-Up Action Plan by which these aspirations will be achieved over the forthcoming years. Target customer groups and information sources used in targeting are shown in Appendices A and B respectively

It is intended that progress against this plan will be reported to members of the Council on a 6-monthly basis to ensure the effects of these activities are properly evaluated to inform the future development of the Take-up Strategy.

The strategy is split into various components as below:

1. Our Aims and Objectives
2. Action Plan
3. Target
4. Monitoring
5. Take Up Initiatives
6. Appendices

Each objective has a list of actions below it so that it can be achieved.

OUR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To ensure that the Benefit Service is made and remains accessible to all residents of the area and is operated in an efficient and cost effective manner.
2. To work closely with service partners (both within the council and external organisations) in proactively encouraging joint working to ensure all resources are utilised within the area to maximise the take-up of benefits efficiently and effectively.
3. To ensure that staff are given effective training, so that customers receive advice and assistance appropriate to their circumstances to ensure that every opportunity is taken to maximise take up of available benefits.
4. To maintain effective and secure gateways to ensure that all benefit claims and enquiries are dealt with accurately, efficiently and promptly.
5. To maintain high levels of customer service to customers to ensure that they are not deterred from approaching the service and claiming benefits by providing a pro-active, caring and friendly service.
6. To deal effectively with all benefit enquiries and appeals to ensure that requests for further information and explanations are provided to ensure that the customer is satisfied about the validity of their benefit claim.
7. To identify areas and reasons for low take-up of benefits to ensure that these issues can be addressed by targeted campaigns and promotions to potential customers.

BENEFIT SERVICE TAKE-UP ACTION PLAN

1. **To ensure that the Benefit Service is made and remains accessible to all residents of the area and is operated in an efficient and cost effective manner.**
 - Continue to review Old Bank Chambers reception facilities to ensure that they meet customer needs and meet legislative requirements.
 - To set up access to the benefit service by providing advice surgeries from other locations i.e. local housing office, housing association offices, libraries, other community locations in various wards within the area as appropriate.
 - The development of the Citizen CRM computerised system :
 - Through maintaining targets set for call-handling performance in accordance with BVPI.
 - Through the training of front line staff to deal with benefits administration
 - Continued development of the Wear Valley District Council website facility to ensure that up to date information is provided
 - Further developments to ensure that the needs of customers with special needs are met including people with disabilities and from ethnic minority groups by working with service partners. This will include;
 - Joint benefits advice team co-ordinating take-up activity in respect of the elderly (Durham Welfare Rights, Pensions Agency, CAB, Social Services).
 - Through working closely with Durham County Social Services Department in co-ordinating liaison with minority groups such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities,
 - Ensuring access to buildings complies with Disability Discrimination Act
 - The on-going provision of a home visiting service for elderly and housebound customers to help with benefit applications and for help in benefit claims verification
 - The availability of frequently asked questions on website
 - Continued adaptations to our services to meet the needs of minority groups such as language line, hearing loop, Braille translations, large print documents
 - Continuing to review the Housing and Council Tax Benefit claim form to ensure legislative changes are taken into account and that it retains the Crystal Mark awarded by the Plain English Campaign so that it remains customer friendly

- In conjunction with the Plain English Campaign to provide up to date leaflets to cover various benefit topics and to ensure that they are available in the Civic Centre reception, Wear Valley web-site, Housing offices and other customer access points such as libraries, Registered Social Landlords' (RSL) offices such as Home Housing etc.
- To ensure that the Housing and Council Tax Benefit schemes are publicised in appropriate places and by the appropriate means through marketing in the local area
- To begin a "fast track" benefits claims service for terminally ill patients making applications for benefit through Durham County Welfare Rights team and Citizens Advice Bureau.

2. **To work closely with service partners (both within the council and external organisations) in proactively encouraging joint working to ensure all resources are utilised within the area to maximise the take-up of benefits efficiently and effectively.**

- To continue to work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to promote greater access and awareness of the benefit process through initiatives such as;
 - Service Level Agreements with Job Centre Plus, Pensions Service and Rent Service
 - "Job shadowing exercises" with Job Centre Plus and Pension Service
 - To provide joint customer advice surgeries with the Pension Service
 - Provision of benefit forms and leaflets at Job Centre Plus and local Pension Service offices
- To continue work with service partners in the development specifically in respect of health and benefits take up promotions including
 - Flu jab vaccinations for the over 60's
- To continue to work closely with DCC and other Council Directorates to promote greater access to the benefits process through:
 - The continuation of a close working relationship with the Welfare Rights and Money Advice Worker to ensure the promotion of Housing & Council Tax Benefit
- To continue to promote Housing & Council Tax Benefit take-up by maintaining regular liaison links with landlords and RSL's within the area:
 - Through the design and issue of regular landlord newsletters to keep landlords informed of benefits take-up issues

- To continue to work closely with Citizen's Advice Bureau, Age Concern and Welfare Rights in Benefit take-up and associated matters including:
 - Meeting at least quarterly with these groups
 - The implementation of joint advice surgeries
 - The shared use of Benefits reception facilities
 - The use of e-government initiatives

3. To ensure that staff are given effective training, so that customers receive advice and assistance appropriate to their circumstances to ensure that every opportunity is taken to maximise take up of available benefits and discounts.

- To ensure that the annual Wear Valley District Council Benefits Service Training Plan incorporates the promotion of Housing & Council Tax Benefit awareness as well as other Social Security Benefits
- To ensure that our training officer is appropriately qualified to deliver effective training
- To ensure that staff within Wear Valley Benefits Service and other staff involved in the administration and/or promotion of the Housing & Council Tax Benefit schemes receive the appropriate training where there have been changes to legislation and they are supported effectively in their own personal training and development programme.
- To provide up to date guidance to staff and ensure that this is available to all staff involved in the administration of Housing & Council Tax Benefit
- Through the undertaking of staff appraisals on an annual basis identify training needs to ensure that staff involved in the administration of benefits are fully aware of the benefit rules
- Ensure appropriate level of resources to carry out quality control checks of benefit processing work to comply with the requirements of the DWP Benefit Performance Standards
- To undertake ongoing job swaps/awareness training internally and with other Agencies

4. To maintain effective and secure gateways to ensure that all benefit claims and enquiries are dealt with accurately, efficiently and promptly.

- Continue to provide all staff including new staff with verification training to the standard required by The Verification Framework
- To provide verification training to other staff including Housing Officers and Cash Office staff to the standard required by The Verification Framework
- To meet the requirements outlined in the DWP Benefit Performance Standards

- To ensure that local and BVPI targets are met in terms of processing speeds and payment accuracy
- 5. To maintain high levels of customer service to customers to ensure that they are not deterred from approaching the service and claiming benefits by providing a pro-active, caring and friendly service.**
- To ensure that effective complaint records are maintained and appropriate action taken to minimise problems in the future.
 - To ensure regular consultation with our customers to ensure that user needs continue to be fulfilled.
- 6. To deal effectively with all benefit enquiries and appeals to ensure that requests for further information and explanations are provided to ensure that the customer is satisfied about the validity of their benefit claim.**
- To ensure that customer enquiries are dealt with by staff with the appropriate knowledge of the benefit regulations and within the prescribed timescales
 - To ensure that the level of resources dealing with benefit appeals meet the demands of this area of work so that backlogs do not build up
 - To promote the customers appeal rights through all available means including the website and leaflets and other documentation and to continue to work effectively with advice agencies such as Welfare Rights, Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure that claimants are properly informed of their appeal rights
 - To ensure that effective complaint records are maintained and appropriate action taken to minimise problems in the future
- 7. To monitor and evaluate customer needs to ensure that the service reflects those needs and to identify areas and reasons for low take-up of benefits to ensure that these issues can be addressed by targeted campaigns and promotions to potential customers.**
- To work with other organisations to identify areas and groups of customers not taking up entitlement to Housing & Council Tax Benefit & other Social Security Benefits and ensure that this is addressed through joint working, targeted campaigns and promotions of the availability of benefits
 - To maintain regular contact with service users and groups in order to highlight potential weaknesses in processes in order that these can be improved.
 - To evaluate effectively all take up work to ensure that resources continue to be used effectively and all income maximisation opportunities are utilised
 - To use the DWP Council Tax Benefit Take-up Best Practice Guide to ensure that the guidance is taken into account in planning CTB Take-up campaigns.

TARGET

Each year we will aim to contact **600** (approximately 3%) of those households in the district who are not in receipt of benefit, through the initiatives listed below. Customers will be encouraged to have their entitlement to benefit estimated and benefit application forms completed. Mail shots will automatically go out each year to each household not in receipt of benefit alongside the annual council tax bill.

MONITORING

The following reports will be produced:

- six monthly to Central Resources Committee on action plan progress and performance against target
- quarterly to senior management on action plan progress and performance against target
- monthly updates to Revenues and Benefits Manager

TAKE-UP INITIATIVES

- Landlord newsletter
- Various articles in Wear Valley Matters
- Mail shot to properties where no CTB in payment and Ctax liability exists
- Flyers with Wear Valley District Council Employee pay slips
- Mailings to local employers
- Road shows throughout various locations in the area
- Joint take-up campaigns with partner groups i.e. Welfare Rights, Age Concern & CAB
- Joint take-up campaigns with other authorities in the area
- Leaflets/posters/flyers in council buildings used by potential benefit customers
- Joint working with Pension Service and Job Centre Plus
- Adverts in local supermarkets
- Handout flyers at local shopping centres/supermarkets
- Target Pensioner meeting centres/groups
- Promotion of benefit calculator on website

EXAMPLES OF TARGET CUSTOMER GROUPS

- Lone Parents
- Low wage earners
- Customers receiving state benefits
- Customers who care for other people
- Customers whose first language is not English
- Housebound, elderly or infirm
- Customers living in most deprived wards in the area
- Customers with mental or physical disability or a disabled child
- Customers with health issues
- Certain customers known to Social Services
- Customers with literacy/numeracy problems
- Customers moving into work from state benefits

POSSIBLE INFORMATION TO ASSIST LA WITH TAKE-UP INITIATIVES

- Council Tax records
- Housing Benefit records
- Pension Service
- Job Centre Plus
- Social Services
- Inland Revenue
- Housing Association tenancy information
- Employer payroll
- HBMS Matching Service information
- Homeline
- Concessionary Travel