

Update report on Housing and Council Tax Benefit Administration

Introduction

- 1.0 This report updates Members about the performance and developments in the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service.

Background

- 2.0 A consequence of the economic downturn has been a rise in the Housing and Council Tax Benefit caseload. Between April 2008 and June 2010 the caseload has increased by 13% from 23,308 to 26,352
- 2.1 The Benefit Service continues to work with partners and stakeholders to promote benefit and increase take-up to support vulnerable households with their rent and Council Tax liabilities.
- 2.2. The National Indicator for Housing and Council Tax Benefit is NI 181 which measures the speed (in days) to process new claims and claim changes.

Performance

- 3.0 Through focusing and prioritising resources the Benefits team has been able to stabilise NI 181 performance and has reduced the peaks and troughs in performance that had occurred in previous years. Appendix 2 shows that despite the increasing caseload, performance is incrementally improving.
- In 2008/09 the average speed of processing was 26.73 days
 - In 2009/10 the average speed of processing was 23.08 days
 - In 2010/11 the average speed of processing is 22.69 days

Service Developments

- 4.0 As well as improving performance the Benefits Service has worked with customers and stakeholders to improve our customers' experience of claiming benefit. We have formed a service redesign group headed

by the Cabinet portfolio holder with membership comprising of Derby Advice, Derby Homes, a Derby City Council change champion and our largest Registered Social Landlord. This group acts as an advisory committee and also shares with us the experiences of customers who have claimed benefits. We have used this insight to shape and improve our service delivery and have introduced the following improvements and initiatives.

- 4.1 We have introduced new claim verification procedures to speed up the claim process. These involve reducing the amount of verification we ask customers to provide and ensuring that our Benefits staff verify whatever they can on behalf of the customer.
- 4.2 At the claim verification stage we telephone customers wherever possible to let them know what proofs are needed to process their claim. This reduces the amount of time claims are waiting to be processed. It also improves the customer experience of claiming as it helps us build rapport with customers, provides an opportunity for them to seek clarification about their claim and reduces avoidable contacts to Derby Direct.
- 4.3 We have introduced an express processing facility. This ensures that customers who have all the information for their claim get it processed the same day.
- 4.4 We are piloting processing some claims and changes at the point of contact – that means customers can get their claims processed and a decision while they wait.
- 4.5 We accept some information from customers via email or telephone which speeds up the claim process.
- 4.6 Where we recognise that customers are struggling to provide evidence for their claim, or are vulnerable, we send Visiting Officers out to their homes to help.
- 4.7 In July 2010 we are introducing telephone claiming for customers via an electronic assisted route. This will mean customers will be able to determine if they qualify for benefit and then complete an electronic form with a Customer Service Advisor. When the form is completed it electronically uploads into the benefits software and is automatically processed.
- 4.8 We have redesigned our verification letter to make it easier to understand so that customers are clearer about the information they need to provide.
- 4.9 Benefits staff work flexibly across the service to meet customer demand which has added value in increasing skills and breaking down silo-working.

4.10 To assess how we compare with other Local Authorities we are benchmarking with and visiting some top performing Local Authority Benefit Services and will be using the lessons learnt to further improve the way we work.

4.11 We have enhanced our existing landlord liaison facility to include Registered Social Landlords and some private landlords. This helps us with the claim process and enables landlords to assist their tenants with their claims.

Recommendations

5.0 To note the report.

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

Any spend is from existing budget and benefits administration grant.

Legal

The Council has a statutory duty to provide a Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Service under the provisions of the Social Security Act 1986.

Personnel

None

Equalities Impact

Our benefits strategy is aimed at encouraging low income households to apply for housing and council tax benefits with specific targeting of pensioners, low earners and black and minority ethnic communities.

Corporate Priorities

The Council's Corporate Plan recognises the importance of a high performing and quality Benefits Service in helping meet its priorities of providing excellent services and value for money.

Appendix 2

NI 181 - New Claims and Claim Changes - average days to process																
Year	Apr	May	Jun	Q1 ave	Jul	Aug	Sep	Q2 Ave	Oct	Nov	Dec	Q3 Ave	Jan	Feb	Mar	Q4 Ave
2008/09	21.2	24.3	20.4	22.0	19.66	19.62	29.27	22.85	25.5	26.64	28.95	27.03	38.59	43	23.57	35.05
2009/10	28.51	27.7	24.7	27.0	8.6	25.66	25.25	19.84	23.56	17.56	25.87	22.33	30.67	18.8	20	23.16
2010/11	23.54	24.05	20.5	22.69												

New Claims - average days to process																
Year	Apr	May	Jun	Q1 ave	Jul	Aug	Sep	Q2 Ave	Oct	Nov	Dec	Q3 Ave	Jan	Feb	Mar	Q4 Ave
2008/09	30.86	33.42	33.23	32.5	34.19	33.98	33.86	34.01	31.81	28.58	31.09	30.49	33.07	31.26	33.82	32.7
2009/10	37.11	38.03	34.88	36.67	36.56	35.42	36.88	36.29	27.39	27.23	26.28	26.28	30.79	22.38	24.1	25.76
2010/11	27.68	28.16	24.8	26.88												

Claim changes - average days to process																
Year	Apr	May	Jun	Q1 ave	Jul	Aug	Sep	Q2 Ave	Oct	Nov	Dec	Q3 Ave	Jan	Feb	Mar	Q4 Ave
2008/09	15.5	18.96	19.16	17.87	21.6	16.28	26.84	21.57	21.94	25.57	27.7	25.07	21.94	25.57	27.7	25.07
2009/10	24.84	23.25	20.73	22.94	6.52	21.55	21.4	16.49	22.32	15.38	25.71	24.02	30.62	17.34	15.9	21.29
2010/11	19.41	19.94	16.1	18.4												