

Stafford Borough Council

Benefit Service

Take Up Strategy

1 Introduction

The current difficult financial conditions have led to an increase in applications for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, which have put some pressure on the Benefits Service, nonetheless the Service recognises that the issue of Benefits Take Up has not previously been thoroughly addressed.

In order to rectify this the Service is to commence Take Up activities in the third quarter of the 2009 / 2010 year, and develop these into a comprehensive strategy in the 2010 / 2011 year.

2 The Aim of the Take Up Strategy

The aim of the strategy is to increase the number of new claimants and to provide the Benefits Service with a general level of assurance that the issue of take up is being properly and thoroughly addressed.

It will be difficult to identify the precise increase in caseload attributable to the take up strategy, due to rising case volumes caused by the recession and by amendments to the Regulations from 2nd November 2009.

However, the target (set in our service delivery plan) is to increase take up by £200,000 by 2010 and by £400,000 by 2014.

The Strategy is aimed at underpinning the “prosperity for all” priority within the Corporate Plan.

3 The Importance of Take Up

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are the principle forms of financial assistance granted by a Local Authority and properly made awards are subsidised at the rate of 100% by Central Government.

Effectively, then, HB/CTB represents the following benefits to the community:

- Security of housing for people that find difficulty with their rent payments
- A significant amount of financial support for the least advantaged members of the community
- Significant income from Central Government to the wider economy
- In the case of CTB, an easing of the collection and enforcement of Council Tax
- A genuine support to the unemployed, disabled, pensioners and lone parents, and in important form of assistance to people as they secure and move into work
- A significant aid to the wider goals of social and financial inclusion and anti poverty strategy

In addition to the above HB/CTB take up is an excellent way for Stafford Borough Council to make a positive contribution to the community it serves.

4 Barriers to Claiming

Research by the Department for Work and Pensions and other agencies has revealed a complex picture regarding the reasons why potential customers fail to claim. A common theme in this research is the particularly low take up levels of pensioners, owner-occupiers and the low – earning employed.

The Benefits Service consider that the principal barriers to claiming can be summarised as follows:

- Lack of knowledge about entitlement
- The presence of “hard to reach groups”
- A potentially difficult process for claiming
- A perception of stigma

Barrier to Claiming	Areas to review and develop actions from
Lack of knowledge about entitlement	<p>The publication of promotional posters advising of the changes to child benefit assessment and pensioner capital assessment and the prominent display of these within the council’s premises.</p> <p>The wider issuing of publicity material, in the form of leaflets, throughout the community at libraries, Stafford and Rural Homes offices, other Housing Association offices, other public buildings, and through welfare agencies.</p> <p>The inclusion of Council Tax Benefit information and advice with Council Tax bills for new occupiers and all tax payers at annual billing.</p> <p>The promotion of HB/CTB take up in Corporate Council publicity material.</p> <p>The continued development of the Council’s website as a source of initial information and sign – posting.</p>
Potential Customers are “Hard to Reach”	<p>Hard to reach groups are typically the elderly, the socially excluded, those with disabilities and ethnic minority groups.</p> <p>House bound and infirm customers will be assisted in their claiming by the Benefits Service’s visiting officer.</p> <p>Joint working is key to the reaching of difficult groups.</p>
Difficulties in claiming	<p>Relevant Stakeholder consultation. Given the large number a pension age claimants and the large proportion of Housing Association claimants served by the Benefits Service, Pensioner Representative Groups and Stafford and Rural Homes Housing Association are important constituents.</p> <p>Staff suggestions and feedback from customers engaging with Staff.</p>
Perceived Stigma	<p>There is still some perceived stigma to claiming benefits, and this is particularly prevalent within the older community.</p> <p>Equality and diversity issues will be addressed through the Council’s corporate framework.</p>

Joint Working

To increase the effectiveness of our engagement the service will compile a Stakeholder Matrix. By recording in a single place all stakeholders and classifying them by influence (% of caseload) and shared ambition (correlation with corporate and service goals) we will identify the major stakeholders and seek formal arrangements through meetings, Service level agreement etc. Minor stakeholders will be kept updated and informed and a record of contact details will be maintained.

Many of the actions above relate to Joint working. The service has engaged regularly over the years with a range of key groups all of who are likely to be classified as major stakeholders. The following is a brief outline of these key stakeholders.

Orbit Care and Repair, we will work with Orbit and other similar partners to make best use of the shared customer base and ensure aims from the corporate plan “Improving Stafford Borough” are achieved.

S&RH, This registered social landlord represents almost 50% of our benefits caseload and therefore qualifies as a major stakeholder. We currently have regular liaison meetings and are working together to ensure both parties obtain mutual benefit and maximum effectiveness from these meetings.

Landlord forum, representing a large number of large and small landlords this group is an important stakeholder and source of feedback re the performance of the service.

Citizens Advice Bureaux, a registered charity which helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free information and advice

Children’s Centre, Children's Centres provide a range of services for children and their families, including childcare and early learning.

Pension, Disability and Carer Service (PDCS). This agency of the Department of Work and Pensions can offer the benefit of identifying customers in receipt of “national” benefits that are not in receipt of HB/CTB. Accordingly many HB/CTB claimants are entitled to additional DWP benefits when their cases are examined from this perspective. Co-ordinated working with PDCS can therefore be one of the most beneficial examples of joint working

Welfare Rights, Minority Community and Disability Groups. The Benefits Service will identify and seek active engagement with local interest groups in order to ensure that full support is given to them. Meetings and visits will be arranged in an attempt to foster positive outcomes for these people.

County Council Stakeholders. The Benefits Service will seek active engagement with the County’s Social Services in order to reach disadvantaged groups and will work with the County on anti-poverty initiatives where appropriate

Internal Stakeholders. The Benefits Service will ensure that all interested internal stakeholders, such as the Revenues Section, have a full awareness of the importance of HB/CTB,

Job Centre Plus. Regular liaison meetings will be held with the Job Centre Plus as they now play an important part in ensuring that newly employed claimants understand that they may have a continuing entitlement to HB/CTB.

5 Planned activity

As stated at the beginning of this document the current financial climate and pressure of work that brings makes it difficult to countenance large scale take up campaigns. Accordingly for the current financial year our aim is to build understanding and commence small-scale targeted campaigns. The following actions resulted from a review of this take up strategy and will be undertaken in the second half of the financial year 2009/10.

Action	Detail	By whom and when
Compile stakeholder matrix	List of stakeholders based on influence and links to corporate goals. Identify major and minor stakeholders to assist with effective liaison. Continue to promote Housing and Council Tax Benefit as a <i>right</i> and to make this clear in publicity material	November 2009 MS
Carry out demographic analysis and evaluate results	The Council is developing socio-economic mapping tools in association with Staffordshire County Council in order to inform understanding of customer groups and this will be a useful tool in identifying need and take up issues.	December 2009 CC
Review documentation and letters	Review letters; consider short forms for changes of address etc. Eq & D training for benefits staff Nov 2009	Ongoing
Carry out customer consultation survey	The Benefits Service is undertaking a consultation exercise throughout November and December 2009 in which customers will be questioned on their preferred channels of access to the Service and on any ways that claiming could be made easier.	November 2009

6 Reviewing the Strategy

The service delivery plan contains specific targets around take up so these will be monitored corporately through performance plus.

Outcomes will be reviewed regularly with regard to increases to caseload and the success or otherwise of the various methods and approaches. A team leader will be assigned responsibility for stakeholder liaison and will keep the stakeholder matrix updated. Take Up will be a standing agenda item on the monthly management team meetings within the Benefit Service.