

Chief Executive's - Finance Service Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction – Interventions and Right Benefit Strategy



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 Interventions and Right Benefit Strategy forms part of the 'Delivering Outcomes' section of the Benefits Business Plan and aims to set out how this can be achieved.

Interventions are the identification of changes of circumstances that are not reported by customers to ensure that the right benefit is in payment. The onus of reporting changes in circumstances remains with the customer but all efforts should be made to encourage and educate customers to report these changes. The outcome is to ensure that the customer receives the 'Right Benefit' and help prevent benefit overpayments.

Good governance measures should ensure that benefit 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.

2. Changes of Circumstances - minimising incorrectness

Benefit customers should be encouraged to report changes of circumstances on time – measures will include the following.

- Encouraging and educating claimants to report changes in circumstances.
- The provision, distribution and availability of information and guidance.
- Publicity - including details of prosecutions.
- The use of tenant and landlord newsletters or forums.
- Promoting awareness and information to partner organisations.
- Following up predicted changes to customers circumstances.
- Ensuring ease of access to the Council to report changes.
- Providing clear advice and guidance.
- Promoting the use of the Council's website for information and forms.
- Maximising the use of available data and intelligence.

3. Interventions

3.1. Data Matching

The use of information that is already known to the Council should be used to minimise error and predict changes. Such measures include routine data-matching against official records for incorrectness by the Department for Work and Pensions and pro-active measures to predict changes of circumstance. These measures are

already set out in the Fraud Prevention and Investigation Business Plan and should be implemented as follows.

- Data-matching will be the responsibility of the Council's Fraud/Verification Officer.
- Data matches should be sifted within 10 working days of receipt of the information to identify those cases most at risk of fraud and error.
- Instances where changes have already been notified, already been actioned, are the result of error, the result of a mismatch or has no effect on the benefit entitlement should be cleared.
- Investigations into data-matching results should commence generally within 10 working days of the sifting process.
- A record of data-matches will be maintained to monitor progress.

3.2 Data-matching opportunities

Data matching opportunities to identify changes of circumstances will include the following measures.

- The Department for Work and Pensions'
 - Housing Benefit Matching Service – matching information held against official records.
 - Automated Transfers to Local Authority Systems – providing benefits data.
 - Real Time Information and Verification of Earnings and Pensions alerts – earnings data matching.
 - Audit Scotland's National Fraud Initiative – data matching against information held by local authorities and electoral records.
- Royal Mail's Do Not Redirect Service – preventing mail being redirected.
- Predicting foreseeable changes, such as key change dates and taking action.
- Regular review of income or benefits with predicted time periods.
- Regular review of occupational pension increases.
- Regular review of self-employed cases.
- Regular review of previous fraud investigation/referrals.
- Regular review of cases where there is no reported income.
- Regular monitoring of key birthday dates that might impact on benefits.
- Matching data against Council Tax single occupancy discounts;
- Matching data against potential Students status.
- Identifying customers who have left their property.
- Visiting customers to verify circumstances.
- Regular review of benefit claimants' circumstances through system of postal checks.
- Encouragement of general awareness from benefits assessment staff.

3.3. Intervention Risk Analysis

Benefits work should be prioritised to identify the correct and most appropriate intervention method based on the level of risk. A risk-based scoring system should be used to identify the nature and level of risk of the cases that are most likely to have not reported a change of circumstance.

4. Intervention Methods

Once the associated risks have been identified there are a variety of methods that can be used to intervene to check for any benefit fraud or error.

- Visiting the benefit claimant – as well as being used as a method of intervention this can also establish residency. The risk associated with undertaking visits to claimant's homes should be checked in accordance with established Council policy and procedures.
- Telephone Reviews - these should be considered for low risk cases. This is a useful method to follow up further information or clearing up simple queries which will also reduce processing times.
- Postal Reviews – used as a regular means of intervention for both high and low risk cases.

5. Review and monitoring

To ensure the effectiveness of any benefit take-up strategies, and quality of service, all methods deployed should be monitored and reviewed at regular intervals to ensure that practices and procedures can be amended wherever possible.

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