

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

Take-up Strategy

January 08

Introduction

Local Authorities have a statutory responsibility for improving awareness of entitlement to Housing Benefit and Council tax Benefit under section 123(4) of the Social security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992.

Rossendale Borough Council is committed to encouraging take-up of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit not only to meet its statutory responsibility but also to meet the following corporate priorities:

- Delivering quality services to customers
- Delivering regeneration across the borough
- Promoting Rossendale as a place to live and visit
- Improving health and well being across the borough

Promoting financial inclusion and boosting the financial security for people who are on a low incomes is a key priority in the Governments campaign to tackle poverty. Part of their aim, is to ensure that every child, whatever their background or circumstances has the support they need to achieve economic well being.

This strategy sets out the action that Rossendale Borough Council intends to take to improve the take-up of Welfare Benefits by its residents. The strategy goes beyond solely raising awareness of the benefits available and covers those issues of customer service that will enable eligible customers to make successful claims.

The Government is concerned that take-up of Council Tax Benefit in particular is not as high as it should be and has conducted take-up campaigns to raise awareness on a national level.

The Council intends to compliment the national campaigns with locally targeted initiatives.

The Council's Strategy:

To actively promote the take up of Benefits within Rossendale, eliminate barriers to claiming where possible and ensure that all residents who are entitled to claim benefits are able to do so.

Reasons for improving take-up

- To break down perceived barriers to claiming benefits
- To reduce poverty for those in need
- To improve the welfare and well being of the local community
- To ensure that equality and diversity issues are addressed by reaching all areas of the community
- To improve the local economy by increasing people's disposable income
- To ensure that corporate priorities are met and legislative duties are discharged

Barriers to claiming

There are a number of reasons why some people are reluctant to claim welfare benefits. Elderly persons in particular are often found to be concerned about appearing to be in need, losing their independence and feeling that they should be able to manage on their own resources.

Some of the perceived barriers to claiming are:

- Stigma associated with claiming benefit
- Previous bad experience when claiming benefit
- Lack of knowledge of the available benefits
- Complicated claims process
- Poor communication and advice by the Local Authority
- Failure to reach vulnerable groups
- Bad publicity caused by delays in the processing of claims

Overcoming the barriers

The Council will endeavour to overcome these barriers in the following ways:

Stigma/Previous bad experience

- By working in partnership with people who have front-line contact with the public to improve the avenues of information available to customers. Partners will include Advice Agencies, Health Workers, Care Workers, other Council Services, Registered Social Landlords and Private Landlords.
- By providing training to partners working on the front-line. This will enable the provision of sound up-to-date advice along with assurance and assistance with the claims process.
- By using positive promotional material.

Lack of knowledge

- By making promotional literature available in those areas of community life that are frequently used by all groups.
- By providing literature on all aspects of the claims process in formats and language that accommodate all groups e.g. large fonts, audio tape, Braille and different languages where a need has been identified.
- By advertising the availability of benefits in voluntary sector and Council produced magazines.
- By holding surgeries and open days in partnership with other organisations.
- By raising awareness of the help that is available by attending meetings of local groups.
- By conducting targeted take-up campaigns throughout the year including the provision of invitation to claim flyers with annual Council Tax bills.
- By continuing to update and improve the information available on the Council's website.

Complicated claims process/poor communication and advice

- By continuing to review and simplify, where possible, the Council's Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit application form and guidance notes taking into account the views of our customers.
- By ensuring that customers and their advisers complete the correct claim forms are available for some circumstances
- By improving advice before and after the claims process
- By ensuring that advice and guidance is provided by other Partners when dealing with potential customers, for example: during tenancy sign-ups for Greenvale homes
- By ensuring that all documentation clearly displays contact points and facilities available for assistance
- By considering the provision of a well-publicised "hotline" for advice on making a claim
- By sign-posting independent advice and assistance
- By making personal contact with customers via the telephone and by home visit in instances where assistance is needed to make a claim or report a change in circumstances
- By communicating awards and changes to benefit entitlement speedily with full explanation in plain language and in format suitable for individual needs where requested
- By reducing jargon and technical terms used in communications
- By providing access to on-line completion of claim forms via the Council's website

Failure to reach vulnerable groups

- By working in partnership with local agencies and groups to raise awareness of each others respective roles by exchange visits and the provision of relevant training
- By improving access and facilities for service users including extending the current home visiting service
- By raising awareness of the "Appointee" facility to ease the claims process

- By offering access to interpreters for customers who do not have English as a first language
- By targeting vulnerable groups of the community by customer profiling.

Bad publicity caused by delays in processing claims

- By ensuring that measures are in place to prevent a backlog of work occurring and to avoid the consequent negative publicity
- By ensuring that performance is measured and monitored against DWP Performance Standards and locally set standards and targets
- By publicising performance in relation to speedy processing of claims to encourage claims for benefit and to provide customers with confidence to manage their affairs

Additional take-up activities

In addition to taking measures to improve take-up by overcoming the perceived barriers to claiming, the Council will also:

- Take part in information sharing exercises with other government departments where that information sharing is lawful
- Ensure that measures are in place to follow up failure to take up benefit
- Consult with our customers about ways of improving take-up, particularly by “hard to reach” groups
- Working in partnership with other Lancashire Local Authorities to promote the take-up of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit by joint activity
- Ensure that Customer Service Staff are trained to a level that will enable early identification of potential eligibility for benefit including in-work benefits such as tax credits
- Consult with partners/stakeholders to identify further methods for improving take-up and service provided
- Ensure that officers, who undertake home visits, including intervention/review visits, are adequately trained to be able to identify customers who may not be claiming other Social Security benefits to which they may be entitled
- Ensure that Service Level/Relationship Agreements include the requirement for all parties to raise awareness and be involved in activities to promote take-up

- Each year produce an annual take up action plan detailing all proposed take up campaigns including timeframes and target groups. The results of all campaigns to be analysed for effectiveness.

Discretionary Housing Payments

The Council will also actively promote the take-up of Discretionary Housing Payments

Monitoring and Reporting evaluation of activities

Regular monitoring of take-up activities will be conducted to determine their efficiency and effectiveness

Details of take-up activities and outcomes will be included in Benefits and Customer Service Performance reports

Conclusion

Rossendale Borough Council is committed to providing an accessible, high performing benefits service that recognises and meets the needs of the local community and contributes to its overall welfare. Part of this commitment includes the need to engage with the community and having a take up strategy that reflects the priorities in Rossendale. We acknowledge the need to work with partner organisations and various agents to reach the full potential for take up of all welfare benefits.