



**Policy Statement
Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit
Sub Appendix 9.1**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this Policy Statement

The purpose of this document is to set out Rossendale Borough Council's policy toward the HB/CTB Performance Standards and to produce a clear statement of intent.

1.2 The Council's responsibilities & service overview

The Council is responsible for the administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefits for citizens of RBC.

Administration of Housing Benefits and Council Tax Benefits is undertaken by the Council's Benefits Service.

The scope of the service includes assessment, verification and payment of all HB/CTB benefit claims received by the Council and involves processing of new claims, changes in circumstances, reviews and interventions.

Customer access to the service is currently achieved by a number of channels: -

- telephony direct to the back office,
- 'walk-in' facilities in the Town Hall and Neighbourhood Offices,
- electronically via the internet or email
- by the postal service.

1.3 Central Government governance

The quality and performance of the Council's HB/CTB services are monitored by central government through: -

- CPA
- Benefits Fraud Inspectorate (BFI)

The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is responsible for reporting on the performance of Local Authority Benefits Services across the country. BFI measure and report on performance every year as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Although the Best Value Performance Indicators provide a regular measurement of Performance, it is the Performance Standards that are the benchmark with which the BFI undertake their inspections. As a consequence, compliance with Performance Standards is a key business priority for the Benefits Service.

The Benefits Service completed its first full self-assessment of Performance Standards as part of the recent BFI Inspection in September 2004. The outcome of the self assessment was that the service only meets 46% of National Standards against. A score of 80% is necessary to achieve "fair to good" CPA rating.

2. National standards

The HB/CTB Performance Standards were first published by DWP in April 2003. They are revised in consultation with the local government associations on an on-going basis. The standards cover the seven key areas of benefits administration:

- Claim Processing
- Customer Standards
- Strategic Management
- Working with Landlords
- Internal Security
- Counter Fraud
- Overpayments

The standards provide a self-assessment tool against which authorities can measure their service and also provide a tool by which BFI can make a judgement by any local authority at a point in time.

A revised set of standards and self assessment tool is now available. which is currently being assessed. Whilst the indications are that the format of this will be simpler the onus will remain to show evidence of meeting all of the existing national standards criteria.

3 Declaration & Vision

The RBC Benefits Service vision is

'by 2008 to provide a Benefits Service that meets national standards and provides a high quality customer experience'

4 Objectives

This vision reflects Rossendale Borough Council's Corporate Objective (Quality Services for Local People) to '**improve the service from poor to fair to good in 12 months**'.

This service is to be provided in accordance with the Performance Standards set out by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The service is to be organised around the needs of the customer and be accessible to everyone in the community in accordance with the Council's Customer Service Strategy.

This HB/CTB Policy fully supports the objectives of the Customer Services Strategy:-

- To provide excellent customer service to **all** customers
- Putting customers **first** at every point of contact and increasing first point of contact resolution
- Services designed for customers and not for convenience of service providers
- To help facilitate a cultural change within the organisation to become more customer focused

These aims are underpinned by basic principles which are that: -

- we will treat every customer equally, whatever their age, ethnic origin, colour, creed, religion, gender, disability or sexual orientation;
- we recognise that our customers cannot go elsewhere for most of our services;
- we will take responsibility for meeting needs;
- we will offer choice wherever possible;
- we will be efficient and effective providing value for money services;
- feedback provides the opportunity for review and improvement;
- every employee has a part to play.

Improvements to the Service will be achieved via a Benefits Service Improvement Plan, which has already been initiated. The objectives of this plan are drive forward improvements: -

- against the gaps identified in the recent 2004 BFI self assessment
- in response to the CPA
- against internal audit recommendations

The Service will be kept under review so that continuous improvement becomes a reality.

The Service will aim to be:

- Customer Focussed and accessible to everyone in the community
- Modern and efficient
- Speedy and accurate
- Effective in reducing the risk and level of errors
- Effective in reducing the risk and level of fraud in order to safeguard public funds

- Proactive in ensuring claimants receive the benefits to which they are entitled
- Positive in minimising the barriers to work
- Effective in supporting claimants to live in decent housing
- Determined that the occurrence of overpayments is minimised
- Effective in recovering overpayments
- Diligent in investigating and punishing fraud
- Strong in encouraging a positive culture of good performance and staff development within the Service

The objective is that in achieving these aims the Benefits Service will be recognised as one of best in country, and will be able to demonstrate clear evidence to support this.

The Service objectives fully support RBC's corporate "8 x 8 vision" and it's Customer Services Strategy which is planned to be implemented during 2005-06.

5 Review and Scrutiny

It is recommended that the service reports on it's performance to Committee every quarter against its objectives and action plans as set out in it's annual operational service plan.

It is recommended that Committee scrutinise the performance of the service through this quarterly reporting mechanism.

It is recommended that Committee scrutinise the services Operational Plan on an annual basis to verify that its objectives and plans are achieving continuous improvement.

It is recommended that Committee scrutinise the Service's Improvement Plan.

It is recommended that this Policy Statement is reviewed annually and approved by Committee.

6 Performance and targets

The key objectives for the service are:-

- to achieve and maintain a level 4 score from its Comprehensive Performance Assessment by 2008.
- To attain and maintain top quartile BVPIs by 2008

7 Planning

There are a number of plans which support the service objectives, these include:

- Benefits Service Operational Plan
- Benefits Service Improvement Plan
- Customer Services Strategy
- Performance Management Framework
- Counter Fraud Policy
- Counter Fraud Service Plan
- Equalities Policy