



Bromsgrove
District Council

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Strategy for the administration of Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit

Revenues and Benefits

Financial Services



February 2007

**Strategy for the administration of council tax benefit and
housing benefit**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council recognises the importance, to residents of the District, of council tax benefit and housing benefit. Council tax benefit assists just under 5,000 residents of the District to pay their council tax. Housing benefit assists over 2,800 residents of the District to pay their rent. Many residents of the District receive both council tax benefit and housing benefit. For the year 2007/08, the Council expects to pay around £12m in council tax benefit and housing benefit.
- 1.2 Apart from the fact that council tax benefit and housing benefit are of direct assistance to many residents of the District, the Council recognises that council tax and housing benefit also impact on landlords in the District, who are letting properties to residents in receipt of benefit. Furthermore, the general economic wellbeing of the District is partly dependent on the payment of council tax and housing benefit to those residents who are entitled to them. The performance of the Council in terms of collecting council tax is affected if those residents who would be entitled to council tax benefit do not receive it or receive an amount of benefit that is lower than their entitlement. The Council is aware that the provision of council tax and housing benefit could be of assistance in terms of reducing crime and disorder in the community.
- 1.3 For the above reasons, the Council accepts that it should adopt a strategy for the delivery of the council tax and housing benefit service. It is not the purpose of this document to set out the details of the day-to-day administration of the council tax and housing benefit service. This document merely embodies the Council's vision for the standard of service that should be achieved and the way in which the Council wishes the service to develop.

2. Underlying principles of the strategy

- 2.1 In formulating this strategy, the Council has taken into account the following:
 - 2.1.2 That the strategy reflects the objectives of the Council to include the aim to deliver quality, high performing services and ensure customer satisfaction. The Council recognises its obligation to provide services to all of our customers on a equal and fair basis.
 - 2.1.3 Council tax benefit and housing benefit are state benefits that are administered at a local level. Therefore, in administering the service, the Council must ensure that it acts within the regulations made by central government in relation to council tax and housing benefit. The Council also notes the requirements of other legislation relating to such matters as

data protection, freedom of information and the investigation of fraud.

- 2.1.4 The cost of council tax and housing benefit is partly met by central government and partly by this Council. However, the majority of the cost is met centrally. In operating the service, the Council recognises that it must have secure systems in place to ensure that monies are properly accounted for.
- 2.1.5 The benefit scheme allows local authorities a certain amount of discretion in the calculation of benefit, eg in terms of disregarding the pensions of war widows. The Council recognises that the exercise of discretion should be reviewed at regular intervals.
- 2.1.6 The Council recognises that the benefits scheme is highly complex and is subject to frequent amendment. For this reason, the Council is committed to the provision of adequate staff training and the recruitment of appropriately qualified staff.
- 2.1.7 In recognition of the fact that the benefit system is open to fraud and error, the Council has a Fraud Strategy with relevant procedures in place to prevent fraud and error from entering the system and to detect fraud and error that has already entered the system.
- 2.1.8 In the interests of all of the residents of the District, the Council will take appropriate steps to recover any overpaid benefit.
- 2.1.9 The Council recognises the role of information technology within the benefits service.
- 2.1.10 The Council supports the Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit Performance Standards and, where appropriate and practical, will aim to meet the standards in full.
- 2.1.10 The Council recognises the importance of the best value performance indicators relevant to the benefits service.
- 2.1.11 The Council accepts that there are residents of the District that would be entitled to benefit were they to apply. It will, therefore, advertise the benefits scheme as widely as possible. The Council will ensure that information will be made available in formats that are accessible to all sections of the community and this will be addressed in the benefit take up strategy.

3. The Council's vision

- 3.1 The Council aims to provide excellent services to its customers. It wishes to ensure that it gives the right amount of benefit to the right people at the right time and that it delivers a high performing, value for money service to our customers.

4. The reporting process

- 4.1 The administration of council tax and housing benefit shall be the responsibility of the Head of Financial Services. The Council expects that officer to report on a regular basis, via either the Executive or other approved route, on all matters affecting the management and administration of the service.
- 4.2 Reporting on the service will be done by:
- Monthly performance indicator (PI) reporting by the Head of Finance to the Chief Executive and the Portfolio Holder
 - Quarterly Performance reporting to the Performance Management Board
 - Quarterly Performance reporting to Executive Cabinet
- 4.3 The Head of Financial Services shall be responsible for the maintenance of a risk register for the benefits function to include monitoring the impact and regular assessment of risks. This information is included in the Financial Services Risk register.

5. Staffing

- 5.1 The Council shall make arrangements for the Head of Financial Services to be adequately supported in the task of managing the benefits service. It is the responsibility of the Head of Financial Services to keep under review the staffing of Financial Services and, in particular, the staffing resources devoted either partly or wholly to the management and administration of all aspects of the benefits service.
- 5.2 The Principal Benefits Officer shall have day-to-day responsibility for the management and administration of the benefits service. It is his/her responsibility to assist the Head of Financial Services in keeping under review the staffing requirements of the benefits service.
- 5.3 All staff employed within the Benefits Administration and Investigation Units will be rigorously vetted prior to appointment and if misrepresentation is found to have occurred, disciplinary procedures will be implemented.

6. Training

- 6.1 The Council recognises that the staff of the benefits service will have training requirements in respect of the benefits scheme and for other more general matters, eg customer-care and equality and diversity. The Council will ensure that sufficient funds are available through its training budget to meet all reasonable training expenses. In particular, the Council will encourage staff to undertake study for professional qualifications such as the

technician level examination of the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation.

7. Performance indicators

7.1 The Council recognises that, to the majority of claimants, the speed, accuracy and efficiency of the service they receive are of paramount importance. In recognition of these factors, the Council is particularly keen that upper quartile performance should be achieved in respect of the performance indicators relevant to benefits. The relevant indicators relate to:

- The average time taken to process new claims for benefit.
- The average time taken to process changes of circumstance.
- The percentage of overpayments recovered in the year.
- The percentage of claims calculated correctly.
- Overall satisfaction of claimants with the benefits service

8. Council tax benefit and housing benefit performance standards

8.1 Although the Council recognises that the performance indicators give a valuable indication of the performance of the benefits service, it acknowledges that there is always scope to improve the service. For this reason the Council has embraced the Department for Work and Pensions' Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit Performance Standards Framework.

8.2 The framework provides standards for the service across four areas, namely:

- Claims administration
- Security
- User focus, &
- Resource management

8.3 The Council aims, in due course, to meet all of the standards for each area. Therefore, the Head of Financial Services has specific responsibility to ensure that this aim is achieved. The Service Business Plan will identify the timescale for the delivery of the improvements in performance.

8.4 For the avoidance of doubt, it is the Council's intention that an effective and secure council tax benefit and housing benefit service will be provided to the standards set out in the various performance standards.

9. Service delivery

9.1 The Council will aim to provide service delivery that :

- Is customer-focused
- Is speedy and accurate;
- Reduces the risk, and level, of fraud and error;
- Provides the resources required to deliver the intended service;
- Is accessible to everyone in the community;
- Ensures that claimants receive the benefit to which they are entitled;
- Minimises barriers to work;
- Helps claimants to live in decent housing;
- Recovers overpayments;
- Investigates potential fraud and punishes fraud where detected; and
- Encourages a culture of good performance within the organisation.

9.2 The Council is working towards meeting these commitments in the following ways.

10. Customer accessibility and satisfaction

10.1 The Council has invested heavily in IT systems and has introduced document image processing and workflow systems. The Council is also committed to the e-Government. The Council will aim to give claimants the ability to interact electronically with the benefits service through the Council's website. These systems will enhance the service the Council is able to provide to its customers. The Council will ensure that it makes the benefits information available in various formats to achieve accessibility to all sections of the community

10.2 It appreciates that, on occasions, claimants will have cause to complain about the service they have received. Where this is the case, the Council, through the Head of Financial Services, will investigate the complaint. Where possible, it will try to resolve the complaint to the satisfaction of the claimant. If the Head of Financial Services is unable to resolve the complaint to the claimant's satisfaction, the claimant will be advised of their right to take their complaint further.

10.3 The Council is keen that the views of its customers are taken into account. It will take action to address areas of concern and make

improvements arising from complaints, customer surveys; feedback from its Citizens' Panel, Equality and Diversity Forum and customer comment cards.

- 10.4 As part of the Council's Best Value Review of the benefits service, it will shortly be introducing a new series of information leaflets for claimants and a customer charter.

11. A speedy and accurate service

- 11.1 The Council already provides a speedy service as is demonstrated by the results for the performance indicators in respect of processing new claims, changes of circumstance etc. In order to achieve a high standard of accuracy, the Head of Financial Services has put in place arrangements to check 10% of all new claims for benefit, to ensure that the amount of benefit to be granted is correct.

- 11.2 The Council recognises that, despite its best endeavours, it will make mistakes. The Council will therefore ensure that it tells claimants of their rights of appeal and, when a claimant appeals, will deal with the appeal as efficiently and effectively as possible.

12. A service that reduces the risk and level of error and fraud

- 12.1 The Council remains keen to reduce the risk of fraud and error. The Council has adopted, with adaptations, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's model claim form. The Council will continue to investigate ways in which the risk of fraud and error entering the system can be minimised and the level of existing fraud reduced.
- In particular, the Council shall:
 - Maintain a Benefit Investigation Section;
 - Maintain and regularly review a Benefits Anti-Fraud Policy;
 - Use the Council's web site to promote the work of the Benefit Investigation Section;
 - Continue to use the 'Do Not Re-Direct Service' provided by the Post Office for the despatch of benefit documents;
 - Participate in data-matching exercises;
 - Provide regular training for Assessment staff in Fraud Awareness;
 - Use the Council's Prosecution Policy to apply sanctions for cases where fraud is proven;
 - Publicise the outcome of fraud investigations; and

- Maintain a fraud 'hotline' for the reporting of suspected fraud.

13. Provision of resources required to deliver the intended service

- 13.1 The Council recognises the high-profile nature of the benefits service and the fact that it 'touches' the lives of many of the District's residents. Therefore, the Council will, upon the recommendation of the Head of Financial Services and in the context of the Council's overall budgetary position, commit the appropriate resources to the service to ensure a high standard of service to benefit claimants.
- 13.2 The Council is also keen to make sure that the residents of the District receive value for money. The Council will, therefore, through the Head of Financial Services, continue to seek ways in which the costs of the service can be reduced whilst maintaining service to customers. The service shall also be subject to regular internal and external audits.
- 13.3 To assist the service, the Council, through the Head of Financial Services, will seek ways in which additional external funding for the service can be secured. Where appropriate, the Council will match any external funding.

14. A service accessible to everyone in the community

- 14.1 The Council is committed to providing a benefits service that can be accessed at a local level. However, it recognises that there are groups of residents that will have difficulty in accessing the service or who are loath to do so. The Council will therefore provide, and promote, the following in an attempt to reach those groups:
- The Ethnic access link for those residents whose first language is not English.
 - A visiting service for those residents who have difficulty in accessing the Council's offices.
 - A home visit, where requested, to all new claimants of benefit.
 - Assistance with form completion.
 - A text phone service for those with hearing problems.
 - Documents in larger type for those with visual impairments.
 - An out-of-hours answerphone service for reporting fraud.
 - An improved website that contains comprehensive material regarding benefits and a benefits calculator,

which can be used to give a person an indication of whether they might be entitled to benefit.

- Articles in Council Chat and local newspapers explaining the benefits scheme and encouraging take-up of benefit.

14.2 As far as is possible, the Council will make its premises accessible to disabled people; it will ensure that the provision of the benefits service is non-discriminatory.

14.3 The Council wishes to ensure that its benefits service is available to residents of the District at times convenient to them. The Council will continue to review the opening hours of the customer service centre through the results of customer surveys.

15. Ensuring that claimants receive the benefit to which they are entitled

15.1 The Council is conscious of the fact that not all residents of the District, who are entitled to benefit, actually claim it. The Council will therefore ensure that maximum publicity is given to the benefits scheme.

15.2 In addition, although not part of the benefits scheme, the Council will raise awareness of Discretionary Housing Payments.

16. Minimising barriers to work

16.1 The Council recognises the important part the benefits service can play when a claimant returns to work. The Council shall, in order to ensure a smooth transition for the claimant, process return-to-work claims as quickly as possible and apply the extended payments scheme where appropriate.

17. Helping claimants to live in decent housing

17.1 The Council recognises the role of housing benefit in terms of helping claimants to secure and retain decent accommodation. Therefore it will do all that it can in order that a claimant's accommodation should not be put at risk.

17.2 To assist with the meeting of this objective, the Council will:

- Maintain liaison meetings with registered social landlords for example through the landlord forum.
- Establish, where possible, regular contact with other landlords.
- Maintain liaison with the Rent Service and monitor the service level agreement with the Service.
- Encourage the use of pre-tenancy determinations.

- Where necessary and appropriate, authorise payments on account for housing benefit.
- Take an active role, in conjunction with other Services, and external agencies, in the prevention of homelessness.

18. Recovering overpayments

18.1 The Council will be proactive in the recovery of overpayments and there is a separate policy which covers this area of administration.

18.2 The Council recognises that not all cases can be treated in the same way and that individual circumstances must be taken into account. Where the facts of the case so warrant, the Council will consider writing-off of the debt for which there is also a policy document.

19. Investigating potential fraud and punishing detected fraud

19.1 The Council is committed to the prevention and detection of fraud. In order to achieve this the Benefits Investigation Section will:

- Maintain and regularly review a Benefits Anti-Fraud Policy;
- Actively investigate referrals of alleged fraud;
- Operate a Prosecution Policy for cases where fraud is proven to include the use of Cautions, Administrative Penalties and Prosecution;
- Promote the work of the Section and publicise outcomes of investigations.

20. Encouraging a strong culture of good performance within the organisation

20.1 The Council is keen to encourage a culture of good performance in order to improve:

- service to the customer; and
- job satisfaction.

20.2 The Council sees poor performance, and the resultant complaints, as a demoralising factor. Good performance will, therefore, be encouraged through, among other, the following means:

- A benefits business plan which is included in the Financial Services Business Plan;
- Individual performance development reviews;
- Regular team briefings;
- Circulation of the minutes of Revenues and Benefit team briefings;
- Circulation of the minutes of meetings of the Financial Services Management Team;

- Training;
- The sharing of complaints and compliments.

21. Code of Conduct

- 21.1 The Council will require **all** Council officers involved in the administration of Benefits to report to the Principal Benefits Officer details of any claims for benefit to which they have some connection. Examples are claims for Benefit where the officer is the landlord, the client or a partner.
- 21.2 If a Benefits officer has knowledge of any claim where they are a close family member, as described by Schedule 2 of the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit General Regulations, then the officer must report this case to the Principal Benefits Officer.
- 21.3 Interest in a Benefit claim must be registered in the Code of Conduct, in accordance with agreed procedures. Any Council officer found to be involved in an offence under the Social Security Act 1992, or any other criminal offence involving claims of Benefit, either at this Council, any other Council or the DWP, will be subject to the Council's Disciplinary Procedures. This will be in addition to any prosecution proceedings that may occur.

22. Duties and Considerations of Elected Members

- 22.1 The Council will require **all** elected Members to report to the Head of Financial Services, details of any claims for Housing or Council Tax benefit to which they have some connection. This may be a claim for benefit where the Member is the Landlord, the claimant, a partner, or non-dependant on the application.

23. Summary

- 23.1 The council tax and benefit schemes are complex and require considerable skill, on the part of the Council's staff, to operate. Nevertheless, the Council realises that the difficulties caused by the complexity of the schemes must not be allowed to thwart the aim of the schemes, which is to provide assistance to some of the most vulnerable members of the community. For residents of the District claiming benefit, their concern is that they should receive the benefit to which they are entitled quickly and efficiently. The Council aims to treat all customers fairly and with dignity.
- 23.2 This strategy, and the incorporation of its principles within section performance plans etc, will result in the expectations of benefit claimants being met in full and will contribute to the general wellbeing of the District.

24. Review

- 24.1 The Council will review this strategy on an annual basis.