

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

30 JUNE 2010

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Take Up Strategy

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Cllr Denaro
Relevant Head of Service	Teresa Kristunas – Head of Resources

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

The Department of Work and Pensions recommend that all Councils should have an individual benefit take up strategy to underpin the operation of the Benefit Service, which will specifically address local needs and circumstances. This shows that the authority is committed to ensuring that its residents are receiving advice and encouragement to claim any benefit that they may be entitled to. The measured outcome shall be an increase in the number of customers claiming Housing Benefit and / or Council Tax Benefit and increased customer satisfaction.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit Take Up Strategy attached as Appendix A be approved.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 states the following:

(3) Every authority granting housing benefit—

(a) shall take such steps as appear to them appropriate for the purpose of securing that persons who may be entitled to housing benefit from the authority become aware that they may be entitled to it; and

(4) Each charging authority shall take such steps as appear to it appropriate for the purpose of securing that any person who may be entitled to a community charge benefit as regards a personal or collective community charge of the authority becomes aware that he may be entitled to it.

3.2 The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has objectives for councils to ensure that residents receive any benefit that they are entitled to. Joint working with other agencies to ensure that applying for welfare benefits is as seamless as possible, is a key element in their strategy for the improvement of benefit administration. Councils are encouraged to look for innovative ways of assisting this process.

3.3 It is important that Bromsgrove District Council show their commitment to promoting benefit awareness and in encouraging people to claim what they are entitled to. This strategy outlines that commitment and details how we will go about this.

4. KEY ISSUES

4.1 There are a number of people who are entitled to Benefit who are not claiming Benefit. It is important that this is tackled and that everyone gets the help they are entitled to.

4.2 There are a number of barriers that prevent people from claiming what they are entitled to. The Strategy details these barriers and the services commitment to trying to remove them

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Council pays out around £17m in benefit each year and although benefit take up will increase this, the majority of the money is reclaimed from the Department of Work and Pensions in subsidy. Some advice given may result in take up of other welfare benefits which will have no cost to this council.

5.2 There may be additional costs involved to allow the service to improve. In particular around improving the access of the service and having the tools to identify take up area's / groups and to monitor the success.

5.3 There are cost implications for promoting the service such as leaflets, posters and forms. However, all of this should be accounted for in the current budgets.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 states the following:

(3) Every authority granting housing benefit—

(a) shall take such steps as appear to them appropriate for the purpose of securing that persons who may be entitled to housing benefit from the authority become aware that they may be entitled to it; and

(4) Each charging authority shall take such steps as appear to it appropriate for the purpose of securing that any person who may be entitled to a community charge benefit as regards a personal or collective community charge of the authority becomes aware that he may be entitled to it.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Strategy is an existing document.

8. COUNCIL OBJECTIVES

8.1 Review and approval of this strategy contributes to the Council's corporate objectives because it supports the priorities of improvement in service delivery and improved customer focus.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT INCLUDING HEALTH & SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

9.1 The risks identified are as follows:

- Increase in benefit customers.
- Not enough staff to deal with the increase.
- Reduced customer satisfaction.

Key Objective 2.1 of the Finance Risk Register 2010 /11 relates to promotion of the Benefits Service and links in to Finance Services Key Deliverables 01 and 02.

9.2 Currently the risks identified in 9.1 are not addressed by the risk register in detail however, upon approval of this strategy amendments can be made to show the following:

“To minimise the impact of an increase in benefit caseload, such take up campaigns should be done at times when staffing levels are at their highest. Where possible, holiday seasons and school breaks shall be avoided to take into account staff shortages due to leave being taken”

“ Workload of the team and individuals to be closely monitored to ensure any problems are identified early”

“Where the budget allows, if necessary staff shall be offered overtime to allow them to complete any extra work as a result of a Benefit Take Up campaign and contractors shall only be used as a last measure”

“Outstanding work is reported to the Benefits Manager on a weekly basis so it can be quickly and easily identified if the team are struggling to cope with an increase in work due to a take up campaign”

“Where possible and resources allow, any work as a result of a take up campaign shall be ring fenced and dealt with by a particular member of section of the Benefits Service so other customers are not affected”.

10. CUSTOMER IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Benefit Take Up campaigns shall mean there will be an increase in the number of customers of the Benefits Service. This in turn could mean the service provided to existing customers could be affected. In the event of this happening, measures shall be taken as mentioned in section 9 to minimise the impact this has.

10.2 A Benefit Take Up Campaign could also impact on the Customer Service Centre due to additional calls / enquiries as well as Housing Associations who have large numbers of Benefit customers. Such campaigns shall be timed, where possible, so that such organisations are able to plan their time to accommodate an increase in their work.

11. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The Strategy was presented to the Equality and Diversity Forum on June 10th 2010 and there has been no feedback from this. Some Benefit Take Up Campaigns shall be done following consultation of members of this forum and may be aimed at some of their specific groups.

12. VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS, PROCUREMENT AND ASSET MANAGEMENT

12.1 None

13. CLIMATE CHANGE, CARBON IMPLICATIONS AND BIODIVERSITY

13.1 None

14. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

14.1 None

15. GOVERNANCE/PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

15.1 None

16. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS INCLUDING SECTION 17 OF CRIME AND DISORDER ACT 1998

16.1 None

17. HEALTH INEQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

17.1 None

18. LESSONS LEARNT

18.1 Benefit Take Up campaigns can be costly and ineffective if not done correctly. Special care must be taken to ensure the right groups and areas are targeted and, in particular, that support is given to those people who wish to claim. Any Take Up campaign must be monitored regarding its effectiveness, results recorded and lessons learnt. Where possible, Benefit Take Up campaigns should be done following consultation with representatives of the groups / area's targeted.

19. COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

19.1 The Strategy was presented to the Equality and Diversity Forum on June 10th 2010 and, to date, there has been no feedback.

20. OTHERS CONSULTED ON THE REPORT

Portfolio Holder	No
Chief Executive	Yes – was present at the E & D Forum
Executive Director (S151 Officer)	Yes – was present at the E & D Forum
Executive Director – Leisure, Cultural, Environmental and Community Services	No
Executive Director – Planning & Regeneration, Regulatory and Housing Services	No
Director of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	No

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Head of Service	No
Head of Resources	No
Head of Legal, Equalities & Democratic Services	No
Corporate Procurement Team	No

21. WARDS AFFECTED

All Wards

22. APPENDICES

Appendix A – The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Take Up strategy

23. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

24. KEY

None

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