

Service being assessed	Benefits – Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit
Who will be involved in completing this assessment?	Miranda Lee, Service Manager Benefits, Customer Services & Bereavement
Date of Review	3 June 2011
Date of Next Review	3 June 2012
What is the purpose of the service?	To administer housing benefit and council tax benefit.
Is this assessment being undertaken because of changes to the service? If so what are they?	Assessment being undertaken as part of Council's annual review of equalities information, not because of change to service/policy.
<p>The purpose of this assessment is to understand how services can help the Council to meet its duties under Equalities legislation. The duties can be summarised as</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Eliminate discrimination 2. Advance equality of opportunity 3. Foster good relations between different parts of the community 	<p>The service has recently undergone a major review using Lean thinking with the DWP, which has resulted in changes to the way benefits are applied for, processed and paid. This has resulted in significant improvement in the way information is gained from the applicant, the speed of processing the information and the target is to “do the right thing for the customer first time”. The benefit application form has been drastically reduced from 36 pages to 6 pages, assistance is given to those who struggle to understand forms or those with literacy / language issues and reminders about appointments can be sent by text message if the customer requests it.</p> <p>Information about what benefits are available and how to claim them are published with the annual Council Tax bills, on the website and through partner agencies.</p>

How does this service help the Council to do this, in particular in relation to the categories specifically mentioned in legislation - Race, Gender/Sex, Disability, Age, Religion/Belief, Gender Reassignment, Sexual Orientation, Pregnancy & Maternity and in respect of Duty 1 only – Marriage and Civil Partnerships?

Quarterly landlord liaison meetings with the service have been held on a regular basis for sometime where we invite landlords to discuss the service, suggest improvements and work with us through legislation changes. This helps keep them up-to-date. A member of the Benefits team also attends the Eastern Landlords Association, an independent association, who work with the Benefits team to shape and improve the service on offer to tenants.

Translation and alternative formats for information are provided by both a national provider (Intran) and a local voluntary partner (GYROS) who provide support to newcomers to the UK. A benefits assessor sometimes sees applicants at their offices when requested.

Regular liaison meetings with the Citizen's Advice Bureau will take place soon (meetings have been ad hoc for some time but a regular liaison meeting is being set up) to discuss policies, get their feedback on how the service is working and to keep their advisers up-to-date on benefits law/any changes to how payments are made.

Appeals Officer receives applications for the Discretionary Housing Payment which helps in cases of hardship. Who can apply and who is entitled to receive the benefit are set out in legislation.

Legislation determines that the date of application determines when benefit can be paid from therefore all applicants are treated fairly. Help to apply is available over the telephone, face-to-face, via the website or a visiting officer can go to an applicant's property to offer assistance (with or without translator as required).

Currently project ongoing concerning Single Room Rate – Central Government change to raise the upper age limit from 25 to 35 which will affect lots of claimants in how much money they can receive in Housing Benefit. The service has recognised this and is working with landlords and other housing providers/services to investigate how to provide affordable accommodation /cope with the potential homelessness issues which may arise as a result of the change.

	<p>A bid is also being submitted to the DWP for transitional funding to help people once the legislation is law – it is hoped to create a website advertising affordable accommodation or house shares.</p>
<p>How will you know that service is working as it should?</p>	<p>Customer feedback – Customer Services, who deal with the majority of the front-facing elements of the Benefits service, often conduct “exit surveys” with customers to get feedback on the service.</p> <p>Compliments, complaints and comments fed through the corporate system.</p> <p>The Appeals Officer analyses the customer information collected and information gained from partners to identify any trends / potential issues emerging and feeds this information into service improvement.</p>
<p>What data have you used to help you make this assessment?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies and procedures • Legislation • Performance information – targets, indicators, measures (end-to-end times, payments v subsidy, etc) • Customer feedback / analysis • Reports gained from interrogating the Benefits processing system – IBS. For example, claim status to make sure that the right claim is paid at the right time • Results of Lean intervention into service • GovMetric information from website
<p>Is there any additional data that you need to collect to help in continuous improvement?</p>	<p>The service has recently undergone a major review using Lean Thinking/Systems Thinking techniques. This has built in continuous improvement into the daily working methods used by the team – as and when they spot a need for data, they will set up methods to collect it and use it to manage the service.</p>

<p>How have you ensured that this service has been designed from a customer's perspective and how have you involved customers in that process?</p>	<p>Please see customer contact as outlined above.</p> <p>In addition, an annual survey is carried out via the telephone and a paper based questionnaire for face-to-face customers. This will be undertaken within the next 3 months to see whether the customer thinks the recent Lean intervention has actually made an improvement to the service.</p> <p>Displays are placed prominently in each reception area where customers are encouraged to give their views about how the service is run.</p>
<p>Has any other consultation been carried out, including to ensure that we have taken into consideration the needs of those not currently using the service?</p>	
<p>What is, or what do you expect to be the impact of the way you work on different parts of the community, including those covered by equality legislation?</p>	<p>Who benefits? Claimants and landlords.</p> <p>Who should be expected to benefit but don't – Why not? Pensioners who are owner/occupiers of their properties but who do not claim the benefits they are entitled to. The DWP are looking at the pensioner numbers in the area and will run a publicity campaign to get people to claim if they are not doing so already. It is often hard to persuade this group of people to claim due to their culture of "we have to look after ourselves" / shameful to claim benefits.</p>

<p>On the basis of what you have found out, which of these options will you now follow</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No major changes • Adjust the policy • Continue the policy • Stop and remove the policy <p>This is a review – not a new policy or service. As and when it is proposed to change the service or policies, new assessments will be completed.</p>
<p>What now needs to be done and by who?</p>	<p>Please see actions outlined above.</p>
<p>Signed off by</p>	<p>Miranda Lee, Service Manager Benefits, Customer Services & Bereavement</p>