

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 24th March 2015

Lead Member / Officer: Julian Thompson-Hill / Paul McGrady

Report Author: Rod Urquhart

Title: Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Telephone Recording Policy

1. What is the report about?

To seek approval for a new policy dealing with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction new claims and changes in circumstances. This will enable further efficiencies in processing and better customer service levels to our citizens.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To introduce the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Telephone Recording Policy, enabling more efficient working practices and better customer service.

3. What are the Recommendations?

Members approve the revised 'Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme Telephone Recording Policy' Policy as shown in Appendix A to this report.

4. Report details.

Background

Denbighshire County Council must adhere to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction legislation. The legislation states that a person can claim benefits in a multitude of different ways, via a standardised claim form.

Denbighshire County Council had previously issued paper claim forms but this is changing and by April 2015 fully functional electronic forms will allow claims to be completed online.

However it is recognised that some customers may not be able to access the internet or would prefer to speak to an adviser either by phone or face to face. Whilst we deal with the face to face contact through our reception areas we cannot offer a telephone claims service at present, which is perceived as limiting the levels of customer service.

4.1 Issues for consideration

Most Local Authorities and Government Departments have an electronic claim form / e-enablement. Furthermore different parts of the DWP, eg the Pension Service also takes telephone claims. The telephone claims, also known as Assisted Claims facility is now being rolled out across a number of authorities in England.

To enable this the DWP developed and approved a Risk Based Verification policy which sets out the information and evidence required before assessing claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. Risk Based Verification is a method of applying different levels of checks according to the risk of fraud associated with those claims.

Members recently approved some changes to the Risk Based Verification Policy in order to streamline the claims process.

The evidence from other Local Authorities who use the assisted claims process have seen a decrease in the levels of fraud as the customer is advised their claim will be recorded and could be used as evidence in any investigation and subsequent prosecution.

Denbighshire County Council is investing in a new telephony system, which has call recording capabilities. It is anticipated the new system will be rolled out across the Council by 1st April 2016. The Revenues and Benefits Service has volunteered to be an early pilot.

The Council is changing the way it interacts with our customers, through the digital choice project. By putting in place an assisted claim process and using the technology we have already invested in, we will be providing a more efficient and effective customer service. It is anticipated that this service will reduce the number of face to face enquiries to complete claim forms or changes in circumstances.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

By offering more choices to for customers to claim benefits or report changes we will help vulnerable people more promptly by speeding up the claim process, ensuring they live as independently as possible.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

There is no additional cost, apart from the amounts agreed for the new telephony system. It will have a direct impact on customer services as we will be providing a better and more efficient service as well as paying the most vulnerable citizens more quickly.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

This policy and the assisted claims service will enhance the customer journey and will be beneficial to all elements of society.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

The draft policy has been issued to Customer Services, Housing Department, Social Landlords, the third sector, stakeholders and partners. To date no requests have been received to change any part of the policy. The organisations have given their support to the policy, indicating it will have a positive impact on the residents of Denbighshire.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

There are no financial implications directly related to this report, however, this new approach to claims handling will improve processing times of benefit claims, which will in turn reduce overpayments made to claimants that then need to be recovered.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

Not applicable as the assisted claims process may reduce the likelihood of fraud

11. Power to make the Decision

- Department of Work and Pensions Circular S11/2011.
- Housing Benefits Regulation 86.