

D R A F T

**HOUSING BENEFIT STRATEGY
2004/2007**

VISION STATEMENT

Gedling Borough Council is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing and Council Tax benefit service. We are fully committed to provide for the residents of Gedling, a service that:-

- § **Is customer-focused, modern and efficient**
- § **Is speedy and accurate**
- § **Is secure, reducing the risks of fraud and error, while investigating and punishing fraudsters and safeguarding public funds.**
- § **Supports customers to live in decent housing**

To support the Housing Benefit Service, the Council has adopted the following overriding policies in order to shape the nature of the service delivery:-

- § **Consults with stakeholders on its aims, objectives and relative priorities**
- § **Is accessible to everyone in the community**
- § **Seeks to maximise benefit take-up to reduce social exclusion**
- § **Ensures customers receive the benefit to which they are entitled**
- § **Minimises barriers to work**
- § **Recovers overpayments**
- § **Encourages a strong culture of good performance within the organisation**

The customer commitments and overriding policies have been further expanded into 11 Policy Objectives. These Policy Objectives each have a range of core components/actions which when completed demonstrate achievement of the strategy.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

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In order to achieve the Council's Vision Statement, the following policy objectives have been developed. Each objective having a range of actions which are designed to demonstrate what action the Benefit Service will undertake, in order to meet each specific objective. The Council will need to develop the Benefits Service, in order to achieve the strategy in full. It is recognised that significant resources are required to achieve the strategy and this will require a period of time. Each policy objective, therefore, has an action plan with specific task and timescales. The action plan will be used to monitor progress in the achievement of the overall strategy.

THE HOUSING BENEFIT SERVICE:-

1. IS CUSTOMER-FOCUSED, MODERN AND EFFICIENT

We are committed to providing claim forms based on the BFI model. Correspondence, leaflets and other forms of communication with customers will be clear and informative.

All enquiries will be dealt with in a timely and helpful manner ensuring all complaints and appeals are dealt with effectively.

We will seek feedback from our customers to ensure we not only do things right but are doing the right things.

We will continuously develop and improve our service to ensure it remains modern and efficient to meet our customer's needs.

We will monitor our performance and administration against the DWP Performance Standards and seek to meet the full range of the standards.

2. IS SPEEDY AND ACCURATE

We are committed to providing a service which delivers quick and accurate decisions on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims, in line with Government targets and the DWP Performance Standards.

3. IS SECURE, REDUCING THE RISKS OF FRAUD AND ERROR WHILE INVESTIGATING AND PUNISHING FRAUDSTERS AND SAFEGUARDING PUBLIC FUNDS

We are committed to developing robust measures to prevent fraud and error entering the system by:-

ensuring a screening process for the recruitment of staff is maintained.

ensuring that the integrity and security of all systems is maintained in line with Audit recommendations.

ensuring secure systems are in place for payment and accounting.

complying with the Verification Framework.

complying with the Security against Fraud and Error Scheme (SAFE)

we will detect and investigate all suspected fraud and incorrectness with dedicated resources and partnership working arrangements, for example Data Matching and National Fraud Initiative (NFI).

we will punish cases where fraud has been proven, by way of sanctions in accordance with the Council's Prosecution Policy.

4. **SUPPORTS CUSTOMERS TO LIVE IN DECENT HOUSING**

We will help customers secure decent housing by the timely and accurate payment of Housing Benefit.

We will work in partnership with landlords and other agencies to promote confidence and provide clear practical advice on the operation of the Housing Benefit scheme.

5. **CONSULT WITH STAKEHOLDERS ON ITS AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND RELATIVE PRIORITIES**

We will consult with our customers and other stakeholders on our aims and performance

6. **IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY**

We will offer a service that is accessible to all customers taking into account their individual circumstances and ability.

We will ensure all communication is in a format that is suitable for the customer's specific needs.

7. **SEEKS TO MAXIMISE BENEFIT TAKE-UP TO REDUCE SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

We will take pro-active action individually and with partners to identify potential claims for Housing and Council Tax Benefit and promote other welfare benefits.

We will develop a co-ordinated and consistent approach to information about Benefits for the district and County.

8. **ENSURES CUSTOMERS RECEIVE THE BENEFIT TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED**

We will ensure that we pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time. We will do this by ensuring:-

staff are well-trained and motivated

systems and procedures are efficient and effective

robust systems are in place for the monitoring and checking claims

9. **MINIMISES BARRIERS TO WORK**

We will provide a seamless transition for customers who move from benefits into work by ensuring claims are dealt with promptly and liaising with Jobcentre Plus to minimise any disincentives to starting work.

10. **RECOVERS OVERPAYMENTS**

We will make stringent attempts, through sound administration, to prevent overpayments occurring in the first place.

Where they do occur, will recover all appropriate overpayments so as to reduce the loss to public funds. We will also take into account the circumstances of the customer, to ensure we act in a fair and equitable manner and do not inflict undue hardship.

11. **ENCOURAGES A STRONG CULTURE OF GOOD PERFORMANCE WITHIN THE ORGANISATION**

We will strive to develop good relationships and mutual respect between staff and other service areas, by clearly defining each other's roles and responsibilities.

We will provide a quality service, based on a culture of good performance, underpinned by a strong performance management framework, which gives pride to those doing the job and satisfaction to those receiving the service.

We will develop an environment that fosters the ability to adapt to change. This will rely on employees who are well-motivated and trained with working conditions which help them provide services with care, quality and fairness.

SERVICE PLAN 2004/2007

POLICY OBJECTIVE 1

A SERVICE THAT IS CUSTOMER-FOCUSED, MODERN AND EFFICIENT

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
CPA Action Plan	Complete Action Plan	December 2004	Head of Finance /HB Manager	Improved BFI Assessment
DIP/Workflow	Introduce DIP/Work	September 2004	HB Manager	Improved processing DWP funding
Replacement of Benefit System	1. Choose Supplier to replace benefit system	October 2004	Head of Finance/ HB Manager	Maintaining benefit service DWP funding.
	2. Introduce new system	July 2005	HB Manager	Staff Involvement in replacement system
Increase achievement towards Performance Standards	1. 2004/2005 80%	March 2005	HB Manager	Ability to target improvement areas
	2. 2005/2006 85%	March 2006	P&D Officer	
	3. 2006/2007 90%	March 2007		
Increase Staff Awareness Performance Targets	Ensure staff are aware of Performance Standards achieved	September 2004	P&D Officer	Stakeholders and staff made aware of benefits performance

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
Housing Benefit Leaflets	1. Review leaflets	December 2004	Client Officer	Improved access to service and benefit take up
	2. Leaflets on internet	February 2005	Client Officer	
Application Form	1. Review annually to BFI model	March 2005	P&D Officer	Improved form design should lead to better access
	2. Form on internet	September 2004	P&D Officer	
Decision Letters	1. Review decision letters	March 2005	P&D Officer	To identify best practice in ensuring clarity and understanding by the customer.
	2. Standardise format and style	July 2005	P&D Officer	
One Stop Shop	1. Review HB service provided	September 2004	P&D Officer	Contribution to OSS Review as requested by Members.
	2. Annual Review	May 2005	P&D Officer	Identify improvement and options for increase service delivery
Communication	1. Review Communication Procedures	July 2004	P& D Officer	Better liaison with stakeholders staff and customers.
Survey	1. Determine method of survey	March 2005	Client Officer	

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
	2. Carry out annual survey	March 2005	Client Officer	Annual Survey
	3. Carry out DWP Survey	March 2006	Client Officer	Information for DWP and GBC to monitor performance
Monitor Service Level Agreements	1. Review service based on feedback	July 2005	HB Manager	Greater integration of service delivery

POLICY OBJECTIVE 2

A SERVICE THAT IS SPEEDY AND ACCURATE

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
To meet performance indicator for speed of new claims	1. 2004/2005 39 days 2. 2005/2006 43 days 3. 2006/2007 41 days	March 2005 March 2006 March 2007	HB Officer	Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management Performance communicated to staff and customers.
To meet performance indicator for speed of processing changes in circumstances	1. 2004/2005 7.9 days 2. 2005/2006 9 days 3. 2006/2007 8.5 days	March 2005 March 2006 March 2007	HB Officer	Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management Performance communicated to staff and customers.
To meet performance indicator for accuracy of claims	1. 2004/2005 98% 2. 2005/2006 98.5% 3. 2006/2007 98.5%	March 2005 March 2006 March 2007	HB Officer	Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management Performance communicated to staff and customers.

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
To meet % of new claims processed within 14 days of receiving information	90%	March 2005	HB Officer	<p>Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management</p> <p>Performance communicated to staff and customers.</p>
To meet percentage of new R/A claims where first payment is made on time	86%	March 2005	HB Officer	<p>Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management</p> <p>Performance communicated to staff and customers.</p>
New Claims Procedure	Review annually	August 2005	P&D Officer	<p>Monitored HB Service providing timely and accurate information for Management</p> <p>Performance communicated to staff and customers.</p>

POLICY OBJECTIVE 3

A SERVICE THAT IS SECURE, REDUCING THE RISKS OF FRAUD AND ERROR WHILST INVESTIGATING AND PUNISHING FRAUDSTERS AND SAFEGUARDING PUBLIC FUNDS

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/Involvement
Counter Fraud Activities and Associated Policy and Procedures	Review Policy and Procedures	December 2004	Housing Benefit Support Officer	Reduce levels of HB Fraud
Verification Framework	Review annually to VF Standards	March 2005	P&D Officer	Increased accuracy to entitlement to benefit
Fraud Awareness Training Plan	Complete Plan	December 2004	Housing Benefit Support Officer	Improved number of referrals from staff
Development of Interventions (Changed renewal process)	Review intervention activities	October 2004	Housing Benefit Support Officer	Development of programme in line with Risk Assessment
Data Matching	To ensure that monthly data matching returns are submitted	March 2005	Housing Benefit Support Officer	Targeted fraud investigations in line with information supplied by DWP/Audit Commission
Staff Recruitment	To ensure a screening process is carried out	March 2005	Housing Benefit Manager	Ensure appropriate staff are employed.

POLICY OBJECTIVE 4

A SERVICE THAT SUPPORTS CUSTOMERS TO LIVE IN DECENT HOUSING

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer Stakeholder Impact/involvement
To meet performance for accuracy of claims	As policy objective 2			
To meet performance processing times	As policy objective 2			
Making payments on account	Review Procedure	December 2004	P&D Officer	Increase the speed payments are made to customers
Staff Awareness of Benefit Procedures for Housing/Council Tax/OSS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set up training plan 2. New staff training 3. Annual refresher training 	October 2004 October 2004 October 2005	P&D Officer	Staff more aware to give better access to service customers
Working with Housing Department	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop landlord forum 2. Improve awareness of private sector accommodation 3. Improve awareness of public sector accommodation 	December 2004	P & D Officer	Improve liaison with stakeholders and increased information available to customers

POLICY OBJECTIVE 5

A SERVICE THAT CONSULTS WITH STAKEHOLDERS ON ITS AIMS AND OBJECTIVES AND RELATIVE PRIORITIES

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/ Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Service Level Agreements	As Policy Objective 1			
Surveys	As Policy Objective 1			
Other Notts Housing Benefit Sections	Liaise to develop objectives	September 2004	HB Manager	Better liaison between authorities, more consistent approach when dealing with customers
Consult with stakeholders on Service Delivery Plan	1. Consult on draft policy	August 2004	HB Manager	Feedback from consultees, considered for final report.
	2. Identify stakeholder representatives	October 2004		Database of consultees
	3. Carry out consultation exercise	Bi-annually		

POLICY OBJECTIVE 6

A SERVICE THAT IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer Stakeholder impact/involvement
One Stop Shop	As Policy Objective 1			
HB Leaflets	As Policy Objective 1			
Application Form	1. Form on internet 2. Increase availability	September 2004 April 2005	P&D Officer P&D Officer	Improved accessibility to service
Satellite office	Review HB service provided at Carlton	December 2004	P&D Officer/ OSS Manager	Ensuring appropriate service provided to customers.
Welfare/home visits	Review welfare visiting scheme	October 2004	P&D Officer/HB Support Officer	Improved service to the people with greater need. Visits done in line with intervention procedure
DDA Act	Review compliance	December 2004	Client Officer	Staff properly trained. Compliance with corporate standard

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer Stakeholder impact/involvement
Corporate Equality Plan (CEP)	1. Consider impact of CEP on benefits service	March 2005	HB Manager	Compliance with Corporate Standard
	2. Undertake work to meet CEP	March 2006	HB Manager	

POLICY OBJECTIVE 7

A SERVICE THAT SEEKS TO MAXIMISE BENEFIT TAKE-UP TO REDUCE SOCIAL EXCLUSION

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Corporate Equality Plan (CEP)	As Policy Objective 6			
Take up campaigns	Consider DWP best practice guide on Council Tax benefit	November 2004	Client Officer	Development of appropriate campaign in consultation with communication strategy
Annual billing	Decide on any take up advertising	December 2004	Client Officer	Decision on appropriate advertising with annual bills for council tax
Training	Provide training for relevant staff ie Housing/Council Tax	December 2004	P&D Officer	Increased awareness of benefit service
Marketing Strategy	1. Write marketing strategy	August 2004	P&D Officer	Identification of appropriate marketing opportunities and liaison with other public service providers to promote benefit service
	2. Implement strategy	April 2005	P&D Officer	
Internal Liaison 1. Housing 2. Council Tax 3. One Stop Shop	1. Produce procedures for benefit take up	December 2004	P&D Officer	Quarterly meetings to discuss communication and performance issues.
	2. Increase liaison between sections	September 2004	P&D Officer	

POLICY OBJECTIVE 8

A SERVICE THAT ENSURES CUSTOMERS RECEIVE THE BENEFIT TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Quality Checks	Produce policy document on criteria	June 2004	Client Officer	Internal Standards set and adhered to
Welfare/Home visits/fraud visits	Provide training for staff	December 2004	P&D Officer	Improved service to customers and improved staff awareness
Housing Benefit Staff Training	Improved welfare benefit awareness	March 2005	P&D Officer	Better integration with the wider benefit environment
Non Housing Benefit Staff Training	Provide training for non HB staff ie Housing/Council Tax	December 2004	P& D Officer	Improved integration between services

POLICY OBJECTIVE 9

A SERVICE THAT MINIMISES BARRIERS TO WORK

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Stocking literature from other agencies	To ensure relevant literature is held and displayed	December 2004	Client Officer/OSS Manager	Ensure access for wider benefit environment
Extended payments	1. To ensure relevant training is provided in respect of extended payments	December 2004	P&D Officer	Customers moving into work are aware of entitlement
	2. Review procedure to ensure that extended payments are paid in appropriate case	December 2004	P&D Officer	Improved benefit take up for customers returning to work
Service Level Agreement	1. Ensure SLA's are agreed and signed 2. To raise any issues at liaison meetings	July 2005 Quarterly	HB Manager	Improved relationship with relevant stakeholders in respect of impact on Housing Benefit

POLICY OBJECTIVE 10

A SERVICE THAT RECOVERS OVERPAYMENTS

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Overpayment Strategy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write policy 2. Implement policy and procedures 	<p>November 2004</p> <p>January 2005</p>	<p>HB Manager</p> <p>HB Officer</p>	Improve collection rates
Prioritise cancellations	To ensure that cancellations are dealt with promptly	August 2004	P&D Officer	Reduced value of benefit overpayments
Prioritise changes in circumstances	To ensure that relevant changes in circumstances are dealt with promptly	August 2004	P&D Officer	Reduced value of benefit overpayments
Inform claimants of the duty to notify changes in circumstances	To ensure all decisions and other letters contain relevant information	December 2004	P&D Officer	Ensure customers are aware of their obligations under the benefit regulations.

POLICY OBJECTIVE 11

A SERVICE THAT ENCOURAGES A STRONG CULTURE OF GOOD PERFORMANCE WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

“Gedling is committed to providing an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service”

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/ Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Fraud Awareness Training	As Policy Objective 3			
Organisation framework	To ensure Vision Statement and service delivery plan is met	March 2005	HB Manager	Business plan development in conjunction with stakeholders
CPA Action Plan	To ensure CPA action plan is met	December 2004	HB Manager	Improved BFI assessment
Performance Monitoring	1. To ensure monitoring returns are made	March 2005	HB Manager	Staff involved in performance setting
	2. To improve management of service	March 2005	HB Manager	Feedback to staff and stakeholders on performance achieved.
Government Returns	To ensure all stats and subsidy returns are made	March 2005	HB Manager	Maximise benefit subsidy
Staff Performance Development Review	To ensure all staff have an annual PDR	March 2005	HB Manager	Improved performance, morale and identification of training needs.

Objective	Target	Key Milestones/date completed	Responsible officer	Customer/ Stakeholder Impact/involvement
Training	To ensure relevant training is given to all staff	March 2005	P&D Officer	Improved awareness of service, process and practices
Team/Staff meetings	To ensure performance is raised and minuted of team meetings	March 2005	HB Manager	Improve communications