



Report to: Policy Review Scrutiny Committee

Subject: Report of Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy Working Group

Date: 25th May 2010

Author: Councillor Barbara Miller

Working Group members: Councillors C Pratt, G Withers.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To provide Policy Scrutiny Members with a summary of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy working group review and its recommendations.

2. BACKGROUND

The working group was established to assist officers in developing the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy with particular reference to the following areas: -

- Range of specific groups for targeted approach.
- Detailed wording of the strategy.
- Appropriateness of performance measures and action plan.
- Targets set for improvement.

3. INFORMATION GATHERING

3.1 The working group held an initial meeting on the 20th April 2010 at which discussion took place regarding the aims of the review and suggestions regarding the range of specific groups for targeted approach. The action plan and wording of the strategy were agreed as appropriate. A further meeting to finalise the review was scheduled for the 11th May 2010 to which officers were asked to bring benefit publicity materials currently in use. The minutes of this meeting are attached at **Appendix 2.1**.

3.2 The working group held a final meeting on the 11th May 2010 at which the targets for improvement were agreed as appropriate and manageable. The benefit publicity material was reviewed and action points and recommendations finalised. The minutes of this meeting are attached at **Appendix 2.2** and a copy of the benefit poster at **Appendix 2.3**.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Overall the group felt that the Housing and Council Tax Benefit strategy should help improve benefit awareness and increase take-up. Members were particularly impressed with the new publicity campaign and outreach plan, and were keen to support these in their local communities. The actions and recommendations from the group discussions are detailed below.

5. PROPOSALS

That Members consider the recommendations set out below, approve the report and support the submission of the amended Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy to Cabinet and Personnel and Resources Committee.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The working group makes the following recommendations to Councillor R. Spencer, Portfolio Holder for Finance:

- i. Senior Management Team and Communications to give consideration for a ward based leaflet giving details of benefits and council services.
- ii. A letter and flyer to members pigeonholes highlighting the new benefit campaign and asking members for suggestions for venues/groups for information visits and surgeries.
- iii. The “do you need help completing this form?” be moved from the back of the application to the front.
- iv. Increase awareness of the benefits service is by utilising IT for advertising and investigate improving links with local groups.
- v. Amend the strategy to include a new target group “Newly unemployed who have never accessed benefit services”
- vi. The working group to recommend to the LSP that the First Contact referral scheme be evaluated in terms of its facility to increase uptake of services and its effectiveness, and to consider extending the scheme beyond the current target group of residents aged 60 plus to include other vulnerable and disadvantaged people.
- vii. Investigation of data protection issues regarding greater use of data sharing.
- viii. Amend the strategy to include a reference to the departments Fraud prosecution policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Working group members were pleased to participate in the formulation of the new policy, and would like to thank the following officers of the Housing and Council Tax for their proactive co operation with the review:

- **John Vickers** – Revenue and Benefits Manager
- **Duncan Adamson** – Business Development Manager
- **Viv Butler** – Housing Benefit Manager
- **Paul Whitworth** – Housing Benefit Support Officer

Housing Benefit Take up Policy Review
Tues 20th April
Working Group Meeting Summary

In attendance

Councillors: B. Miller, C.Pratt, G.Withers

Officers: J. Vickers, V. Butler, D. Adamson, Paul Whitworth, J. Ansell

Election of Chair – B. Miller was nominated to chair the group

Background, aims of the review – J. Vickers explained the need for Scrutiny input into the revised Housing Benefit Policy identified at an SMT meeting in February. In the light of the economic downturn, its intent is to extend the reach of the Housing Benefit team and increase take up of benefits from currently underrepresented groups. Some proposed actions are immediate, and some roll out over the next 2 – 3 years.

Discussion: There was a general discussion / q and a session during which Members were made aware of the specialist teams of visiting advisers and innovative marketing i.e. on Sainsburys receipts, giving a direct line number and first name for the benefit liaison officer. Enquiries also come through the One Stop Shop, and details are passed on to the benefit liaison officer. Details of underrepresented groups are gathered from the day to day benefit work. The caseload has increased by 8 – 10% during the economic downturn.

Are there any comments on the detailed wording of the strategy?

Members were happy with the wording of the Strategy.

Is the range of specific groups that have been identified for the targeted approach appropriate?

Members had the following suggestions and points for consideration:

- Members endorsed the need to find ways of overcoming pensioners' reluctance and break down the stigma of applying for benefits. Elected Members have a role to play in this. Benefit numbers etc could be included in a Local Councillor led, ward based "welcome to your area" leaflet.
- The "do you need help completing this form?" section needs to be at the front, not the back of the application form. This needs to be referred up to the Notts and Derbyshire Strategic Group.

Appendix 2.1

- Internet availability of the form was discussed – it is just now available as a download – 8 people have so far accessed it, but it hasn't been properly publicised yet.
- We need to pick up on the borderline cases who may think they are not entitled – there is a benefit entitlement calendar on the internet – needs to be widely publicised.
- Detailed evaluation of take up has not been possible, but shortly will be due to forthcoming Customer Insight Project with Experian.
- Maximise links with Citizens Advice Bureaux and Doctors Surgeries – some resistance exists, however keep trying.
- A Task Force could be directed at a particular deprived area for an intensive period, then move on to the next – build on current work with the Neighbourhoods Team and links to Sure start events.
- Contact local lunch clubs and older persons' voluntary groups in liaison with Gedling CVS, who can sometimes mail out info to their databases if we pay the postage.
- Jane will pass on older groups contacts from the Over 60' Health Scrutiny Review once permission obtained – improve multicultural access.
- Target the sons and daughters of retired people – feasibility of this is difficult.
- Leaflets should be produced in a range of known local languages where possible
- Maximise links with the First Contact referral scheme – working group to recommend to the LSP that this initiative be evaluated in terms of its facility to increase uptake of services and its effectiveness, and to consider extending the scheme beyond the current target group of residents aged 60 plus to include other vulnerable and disadvantaged people.
- There is a new breed of client emerging from the economic downturn; i.e. one experiencing a sudden change in economic status and unused to claiming benefits – “white collar homelessness”. This type of client should be added in to the policy as a target group, and a scheme considered which can address their needs.
- Consider ways of obtaining advance notice of homelessness, as with the mortgage rescue scheme, which picks up on owner occupiers in serious trouble.

- The group recognised that the homelessness section requires a signed agreement from the client to refer on for benefit advice.
- Links to be established with the work of the new Economic Development Officer post, as that officer will be developing learning, skills and employment as well as business development initiatives that will target some of the same client groups.
- Involve local Elected Ward Councillors more in getting the message out to the public, as well as in gathering information about the communities they serve, where problems exist and where an awareness session might be best targeted.
- Consider how the One Stop Shop might be maximised to get the message out to potential clients, i.e. at bus pass issue point or via recorded telephone messages/rolling digital display in reception when client is holding or queuing.
- Obtain advice from the Legal department for the introduction of a data protection disclaimer to databases and registers, so that information on potential clients can be shared between departments.
- Consider engaging with church organisations, many of whom carry out community visiting and social work. There is often a named minister or vicar, and also a Churches Together organisation.

Are the action plan and performance measures appropriate?

All agreed that these were appropriate

Are the improvement targets realistic and achievable?

To be further discussed at the next meeting

Any additional information required?

Members would like to look at some of the promotion materials at the next meeting.

Date of next meeting

Tuesday 11th May

5.30pm

I.T. Room, First Floor

Housing and Council Tax Benefit Take up Policy Scrutiny Review
Tues 11th May
Working Group Meeting Summary

In attendance

Councillors: B. Miller, C. Pratt

Officers: J. Vickers, D. Adamson, J. Ansell

Apologies: G. Withers

Minutes of last meeting were approved as a correct record

TARGETS FOR IMPROVEMENT

J.V. informed the group that the Local Area Agreement target NII8 has been removed, and will no longer appear in the strategy.

D.A. will closely monitor progress against targets and will be improving the use of I.T. systems.

J.V. explained that targets set are tough, but realistic, based on the current caseload. If there was a sudden increase in the caseload, or a prolonged period of staff sickness, then performance requirements would need to be managed.

There are systems in place for dealing with these contingencies: the procedural back up system produces automated alert triggers, i.e. at 450 items outstanding, which would prompt J.V. to consider remote staff support and overtime.

J.V. reported that there has been an encouraging start to the year on performance, which stands the team in good stead for achievement over the whole year.

In the light of the above, Members agreed that targets and milestones are appropriate and manageable.

PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN

D.A. gave members an overview of the previous publicity campaign "Are you Losing Out?"

Promotion was targeted via the One Stop Shop, on bins, outside Netherfield Morrisons and on the back of till receipts at Sainsburys. Visiting officers were instrumental in getting information out to target groups.

A number of local press releases were shared with the group, including examples of successful fraud prosecutions.

D.A. then presented the new campaign "It Benefits You".

The children of a member of the staff team were asked to design a poster, which was shared with the group. Members were very impressed with the design.

The new campaign has so far been rolled out at the Killisick Community E vent, on the back of car parking tickets (for a period of 3 months).

C.P. suggested including it on over 60s bus passes. He also committed to publicising the campaign through the Methodist Church network and Newsletter, which has a large audience amongst the elderly.

B.M. highlighted the need to reach the 18 – 25 age group and suggested a session at the LOCO youth club in Netherfield, which has members aged 13 – 25. She also recommended a session with the Netherfield Senior Citizens Group, which she attends and can help arrange.

The group then went through the recommendations listed at the last meeting and established the viability and deployment of actions as follows:

Appendix 2.2

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The role of Elected Members in helping to increase take - up

Whilst a ward based leaflet giving details of benefits and services and including contact details of local councillors was deemed a good idea, care would need to be taken to ensure that the Members are not inundated with inappropriate enquiries.

Action 1: Working Group to Refer to SMT and Communications for consideration

Action 2: A letter and flyer to Members pigeonholes highlighting the new campaign and asking members for suggestions for venues/groups for information visits and surgeries.

2. Amendments to the application form

The “do you need help completing this form?” section needs to be at the front, not the back of the application form. Any amended form would not be produced until the next run – at least 6 months time.

Action: Refer up to the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Strategic Group

3. Channel Migration/ Use of I.T

Increase public awareness of the online download application form and benefit entitlement calculator.

Action: D.A to incorporate Internet access in the new campaign

Explore I.T promotional opportunities in the wider community, i.e. Schools visual display units, buses, library I.T. equipment. Add the new poster/logo as a screen saver to the One Stop Shop self service P.C. and add to over 60s bus pass.

Action: D.A. to follow up

4. Customer profiling

Maximise the outcomes of the forthcoming Customer Insight Project with Experian, which will help to identify where best and how to target support and information. Consider using information gained to direct a Task Force to particularly deprived areas for short intensive periods, building on current work with the Neighbourhoods Team. Examine also the phenomenon of the so called “white collar deprivation” coming out of the economic downturn

Action - D.A. to take forward, J.V to incorporate additional target groups emerging from this work into the Strategy / Forward plan

5. Outreach and Partnership working

Pursue links Citizens Advice Bureaux and Doctors Surgeries.

Action: D.A. to incorporate in new campaign, and liaise with the Gedling LSP to help with partnership approaches

Contact local lunch clubs and older persons’ voluntary groups in liaison with Gedling CVS, who can sometimes mail out info to their databases if we pay the postage. Jane will pass on older groups contacts from the Over 60’ Health Scrutiny Review once permission obtained – improve multicultural access.

Action: JA to obtain permissions and pass on contacts to D.A.

Consider engaging with church organisations, many of whom, especially the Catholic Church, Mosques and Hindu Temples, do community visiting and social work. There is often a named minister or vicar, and also a Churches Together organisation.

Action: D.A. to include in outreach plans

Leaflets should be produced in a range of known local languages where possible. Translations are produced when requested, however budgets are limited.

Action: Working Group to refer the issue of translations of Corporate publicity to the Gedling Equalities Group

Maximise the effectiveness of the First Contact referral scheme.

Action: The working group to recommend to the LSP that this initiative be evaluated in terms of its facility to increase uptake of services and its effectiveness, and to consider extending the scheme beyond the current target group of residents aged 60 plus to include other vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

Links to be established with the work of the new Economic Development Officer post, as that officer will be developing learning, skills and employment as well as business development initiatives that will target some of the same client groups.

Action: D.A. to liaise with EDO once in post

6. Data Protection and information sharing

Obtain advice from the Legal department for the introduction of a data protection disclaimer to databases and registers, so that information on potential clients can be shared between departments.

Action: Working group recommendation - Refer to Helen Barrington, Senior Legal Officer, for advice.

7. Other

Reference is made in the strategy to the existence of, and relationship to, the Departments' Fraud Strategy **Action: J.V.**

REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS AND TIMESCALE

It was agreed that the above recommendations are incorporated into a final report by J.V. with assistance from J. A.

The report will then be circulated to the working group members by email by Friday 14th May 12 noon latest, with a request for final comments back by 4pm that afternoon.

A 6 month Scrutiny review date will be set for consideration of progress and effectiveness of the new strategy.

The meeting ended at 6.40pm