

REVENUES SERVICES SECTION

GEDLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

**THE STRATEGY FOR HOUSING AND
COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS AND THEIR
TAKE UP
2010/11 – 2012/13**

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Borough of Gedling has a population of over 112,600 with currently around 8% of its citizens on some level of benefits. The level of housing and council tax benefit awarded is in excess of £30m per year. It is therefore essential that the opportunities for housing and council tax benefits be publicised so that its residents apply for the benefits they are entitled to in order to reduce poverty and promote social and financial inclusion, through benefit maximisation.
- 1.2. The Council Plan for 2010/11 has Community Strategy Themes of “A place of safe and strong communities” with an objective to reduce levels of deprivation in priority neighbourhoods and “A place where people are treated fairly and have the opportunity to get involved” with an objective to minimise the incidence of homelessness in the Borough. We see the benefits service as a fundamental platform in the delivery of this.
- 1.3. Recent Government studies and our own experience suggest there is a high degree of reluctance and misunderstanding that act as barriers for people accessing the benefit that they have a direct entitlement to. The Council has devised an action plan to overcome this reluctance. This document demonstrates the strategy around which the services action plan has been developed and the strategy does include a detailed plan to achieve this over the next two years.

2. WHAT IS HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT?

- 2.1. Housing and council tax benefit is a local authority administered state benefit based on the income and circumstances of the individual rent and council taxpayer. Anyone who is a tenant and whose income brings them within the scheme is able to claim housing benefit to help with the rent and council tax benefit to help with the council tax. Owner-occupiers can claim for council tax benefit alone. The amount of benefit is determined based on a person's income and in the case of couples on the combined income of both partners. The rules for calculating benefit are quite complex and take account of the age and circumstances of the applicant and any dependent children. However, there are deductions from benefit for any non-dependent adults in the household who it is considered should make a contribution towards the rent and council tax bill.

3. HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT SERVICE

- 3.1. The Housing and Council Tax Benefit service is one of the most significant services the Council delivers. In resource terms, the benefits service has a budget of £1,464,000 with 29.2fte staff, supplemented by 7.4fte on the contact centre. The current caseload is 9,200 cases and benefit in excess of £30m is paid each year.

Service Objectives:

To provide an efficient, effective and secure Housing and Council Tax benefit service that:

- Is customer focused, modern and efficient
- Is speedy and accurate
- Is secure, reducing the risks of fraud and error whilst investigating and punishing fraud
- Supports residents in decent housing
- Is accessible to everyone in the community
- Seeks to maximise benefit take up to reduce social exclusion
- Ensures residents receive the benefit they are entitled to
- Minimises barriers to work
- Recovers overpayments taking into account the customers circumstances
- Encourages a strong culture of good performance within the organisation
- Implements all legislative changes within required timescales
- Consults with its customers
- Promotes joint working initiatives
- Assists people to move away from benefit dependency

4. WHY A BENEFITS STRATEGY IS IMPORTANT

4.1. Councils have a legal obligation to develop and implement policies to address poverty and social exclusion. Maximisation of the benefit scheme will help to achieve this and as a result improve the quality of life for Gedling Borough residents.

- *Section 123(3)(a) Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, states that every authority awarding Housing Benefit:*

“... 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”

Requirements in respect of Council Tax Benefit are in 123(4)(a) of the same act.

4.2. Benefit take-up supports residents in decent housing.

4.3. Benefit take-up demonstrates action on poverty, social and financial inclusion, and improves the local economy. Income of recipients is improved bringing a direct positive impact on increased spending in the community. Maximisation of benefit generates disposable income that can help with family lifestyle.

- 4.4. Positive action could have a long term knock-on effect of easing pressures on services dealing with long-term poverty e.g. Health Services, reducing worklessness and tackling inequality.
- 4.5. Maximising take up can improve the collection of council tax. An outcome of more wealth in the community could mean a decrease in money owed to the Council.
- 4.6. Meeting the Council's community strategy theme of a place of safe and strong communities.
- 4.7. Government research still continues to show a significant amount of housing and council tax benefit that is not claimed by members of the public. There may be a number of reasons for this:
 - Lack of awareness.
 - Lack of understanding of the gains to be had from claiming. It can be perceived that it is 'too much trouble' to claim.
 - Complicated procedures for claiming benefit.
 - Perceptions that benefit awards are 'charity' payments.
 - Previous bad experiences or negative expectations being passed on to people who have never claimed before.
- 4.8. This strategy will aim to address how to overcome these barriers. We recognise that there is no one reason why people do not claim what they are entitled to and will therefore endeavour to adopt a variety of approaches and focus on a range of customer groups.
- 4.9. Gedling Borough Council is committed to partnership working to make the best use of resources available to address benefit take up.
- 4.10. This strategy needs to be read in conjunction with the Council's benefits Fraud prosecution policy.
- 4.11. Gedling Borough Council has a strong and positive commitment to ensuring equality in all of its services when addressing benefit take up.

5. HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS STRATEGY

5.1. Introduction

5.1.1 Gedling Borough Council is committed to providing an accessible, high performing housing and council tax benefits service that recognises and meets the needs of the local community and contributes to its overall welfare. Part of this commitment includes recognising the need to engage with the community and having a take up strategy that reflects the

Council's commitment to the promotion of Housing and Council Tax Benefit.

5.1.2 This strategy details the methods that Gedling Borough Council will use to ensure claimants are enabled to make successful claims. It provides the link between the Service's overall aim and priorities, detailed in the Sections Service Plan, and operational practice.

5.1.3 The strategy has been developed in collaboration with all of the Nottinghamshire District Councils and Nottingham City Council to identify areas of best practice and innovation in promoting take up.

5.2. **Partnership and Liaison**

5.2.1 Gedling Borough Council believes that there are many advantages in working in partnership with other agencies to maximise the income of the groups highlighted above. Such agencies include:

- Job Centre Plus
- Pension Service / Local Pension Service
- Nottinghamshire County Council (Adult Care Financial Services)
- Gedling Homes
- Gedling Borough Council Housing Needs Section
- Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
- Age Concern
- Framework
- Nottingham Community Housing Association
- Accent Nene Housing Association
- Places for People
- Guinness Trust
- Northern Counties Housing Association
- Longhurst and Havelock Homes Ltd
- Execulets
- Gascoigne Letting Agents
- Andrew Butler & Co
- Community Safety Partnership
- Nottinghamshire County Primary Care Trust
- Other local authorities

Action Point 1: *Develop closer working with the Nottinghamshire County Council's Welfare and Employment Rights Section and Social Care and Health Department (which is now part of the Adults and Housing Department) to identify under-represented groups and co-ordinate joint take-up campaigns for various benefits and services.*

Action Point 2: *Develop an effective take-up plan with Gedling Homes to identify tenants who may not yet be claiming benefits.*

- 5.2.2 In particular joint partnership working has been established with other local authorities within Nottinghamshire, Job Centre Plus and the Local Pension Service visiting teams to endeavour to maximise entitlement across the District and the County. This will continue to form part of our on-going service delivery.

Action Point 3: *Maintain regular evaluation of take up strategy with other Nottinghamshire authorities at the Housing Benefit forums*

- 5.2.3 There is a Service Level Agreement in place between the Benefit Section and Job Centre Plus/Pension Service, six monthly meetings are held to review the agreement. In addition there is a memorandum of understanding with the Local Pension Service and Adult Care Financial Services working as a joint team.

- 5.2.4 Service Level agreements are also in place with our major registered social providers – Nottinghamshire Community Housing Association and Gedling Homes and it is our ambition to extend this to other significant landlords.

Action Point 4: *Develop closer working relationships and partnerships with all of our registered social landlords and private landlords and agents through greater use of landlord consultation and forums to ensure effective two-way communication on all welfare benefit issues.*

Action Point 5 : *Consolidate working relationships with local Registered Social providers so that they are able to assist customers with the completion of the application form and verify information to support the application, thereby improving accessibility to the benefits service.*

5.3. Home Visits

5.3.1 Home visits are available on occasions where the customer is unable to visit the Council offices.

Officers undertaking home visits will be appropriately trained, be authorised to visit and will aim to identify other benefits or assistance that may be available from the Borough. Officers will always carry identification and be fully aware of the Council's Loan Working Policy.

Action Point 6 : *Work with the Councils' environmental protection team to identify households eligible for support in respect of fuel poverty.*

With an ageing population these requests may increase. It is intended that in future these visits will be booked through the Gedling 1Stop contact centre and carried out by trained benefits staff.

Action Point 7 : *Electronic diaries for Visiting Officers to be made available to One Stop staff in order that routine appointments can be made at the first point of contact*

5.4. Targeted Take Up

5.4.1. Approach

5.4.1.1 Apart from under-claiming groups the service needs to identify and target information at other groups. These include groups with a high chance of a successful claim, groups who would be entitled to housing or council tax benefit if they took up other benefits and people on low income. These will be achieved by the use of smart data, through the Councils shared participation in the Customer Insight project across all the Nottinghamshire councils. Gedling Borough Council will seek to encourage all customers to apply for the benefits that they are entitled to. There is recognition that certain groups may need specific focus and expertise. When dealing with these vulnerable groups we will ensure that staff are appropriately trained in respect of the Councils responsibility for protecting vulnerable adults in line with the County Councils overall strategy.

These may include;

- Pensionable Age

- Those with mental health problems
- Housebound and Disabled
- Lone parents and young families
- Working families on low income / In work low income customers
- Vulnerable people with the threat of becoming homeless
- People who live in deprived areas
- Black minority and ethnic / migrant workers
- Owner-occupiers
- Those suffering from serious illness
- Newly unemployed who have never accessed benefit services.

The following targeted approaches are taken for the groups identified as needing specific focus:

5.4.2 **Pensionable Age**

5.4.2.1 Gedling Borough Council has a "Sign posting" service available for those customers aged over 60 that acts as a single gateway to a range of services designed to help people remain in their homes. The First Contact Signposting Scheme helps to maximise people's welfare entitlements as well as grants, advice and practical assistance to overcome fuel poverty / heating difficulties and advice on affordable warmth.

Action Point 8 : *Continue to support the aims of the First Contact Scheme*

5.4.2.2 When a Partner agency is in contact with a person aged 60 or over they complete a simple checklist form. The form collects basic contact details and then asks 12 simple yes/no questions. The form is then faxed to First Contact who make the appropriate referrals to the partner agencies.

5.4.2.3 Joint working with The Pension Service and Local Pension Service so that our elderly customers will receive a 'one stop' approach to their benefits.

Action Point 9 : *Data matching against scan discs provided by the Pension Service to identify where housing and council tax benefit is not being claimed and there is a high chance that if claimed it would be payable*

- 5.4.2.4 For the past five years The Pension Service has provided the Benefit Section with a list of customers who are in receipt of Pension Credit (Savings Credit and/or Guarantee Credit). This information has been matched with information that is already held on the Council's benefits database system to identify eligible customers. Where entitlement to housing or council tax benefit is likely these cases have been referred to our Visiting Team who give assistance to people by visiting them in their homes.
- 5.4.2.5 The visiting officers will obtain claims for council tax and housing benefit as well as also establishing if there is any entitlement to Pension Credits and other welfare benefits including Carers allowance, Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance.
- 5.4.2.6 Gedling Borough Council has a dedicated take-up officer assisted by a team of visiting officers that are available to visit people in their homes. People feel more at ease in their own homes and any stress or worry that may be felt about claiming Housing/Council Tax Benefit can be reduced by home visits. These officers also refer cases to the Local Pension Service and Job Centre Plus where it is likely that they will qualify for other welfare benefits. It has been established that many elderly customers would not have applied for the benefit if they had been expected to complete the application forms or if they were required to attend at the Council offices.
- 5.4.2.7 People who may not access information direct from the authority can access information on housing and council tax benefit from other agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Age Concern, etc.
- 5.4.2.8 As a consequence of pro-active take up activity, new benefit recipients who received a high standard of customer service and a positive outcome will encourage others to enquire whether they are entitled to any benefit and to pursue it. Many pensioners rely on what they have been told rather than getting information themselves.

Action Point 10 : *Explore new take up opportunities with the Local Pension Service, attending flu jab clinics and community centres to encourage take-up amongst pensioners*

5.4.3 Those with Mental Health Problems

- 5.4.3.1 Joint working with the Nottinghamshire County Council so that vulnerable persons will receive a 'one stop' approach to their benefits. A referral system has been established with the Nottinghamshire County Council (Adult Care Financial Services) to receive and verify housing / council tax benefit claim forms from people they visit who have been identified as vulnerable. Referrals are received from the First Contact gateway scheme (described above), Help the Aged, Citizens Advice Bureau, Welfare Rights and directly from the customer.
- 5.4.3.2 In depth training in order for officers from the County Council to identify possible eligibility for their customers for council tax/housing benefit is provided through the Nottinghamshire HB forum. In depth training has also been provided on possible eligibility for Second Adult Rebate and Council tax discounts/disregards since many of their customers live with family members due to their care needs.

Action Point 11 : *Continue to ensure NCC staff are adequately trained.*

5.4.4 Housebound and Disabled

- 5.4.4.1 Home visits are available where the customer is unable to visit the Council offices. Officers from Gedling Borough Council undertaking home visits are appropriately trained and authorised to visit.
- 5.4.4.2 The Local Pension Service and Adult Care Financial Services also visit customers referred to them from the Council even if the customer is of working age.

5.4.5 Lone Parents and Young Families

- 5.4.5.1 Officers from Framework have been trained to provide advice on housing and council tax benefit and assist them to complete application forms. They have also been trained to verify Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claim forms on behalf of the Council, and receive ongoing training from the Council on all benefit matters.

5.4.6 **Working families on low income/in work low income customers**

5.4.6.1 Households that would qualify for Housing Benefit/ Council Tax Benefit if they claimed will be identified using profiling data from a wide range of public and private sources matched to the information already held on the Council's benefits database. These households will then be targeted to encourage them to make a claim for Housing Benefit and / or Council Tax Benefit.

5.4.6.2 Proactive working with the Council's Economic Development Officer and the Job Centre Plus to promote benefit take-up particularly when there is advanced notice of employers closing down.

5.4.6.3 Proactive use of the Council's state of the borough information to identify possible areas for take-up.

5.4.7 **Vulnerable people with the threat of becoming homeless**

- Closer working with the Council's Housing needs team ensures that the most vulnerable are fast tracked through the application process. The claims processing system has been changed to prioritise people presenting themselves as homeless. A strategic approach is taken which aims to meet the needs of people threatened with homelessness before they become homeless. The following steps have been taken:
- Customers who are living in temporary accommodation or are private tenants at risk of moving into temporary accommodation have their claims fast tracked when requested by the Housing Needs team.
- The Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme is used to assist Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit customers who may need further financial help with their housing costs during periods of short-term need or support.
- Limited funds are received from the Government for the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme. The amount that can be spent on the scheme each year is restricted and not everyone who claims a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) is awarded a payment.
- The use of DHP for households unable to afford their rented accommodation due to exceptional circumstances can be a useful tool for preventing homelessness.

- Through forums, the benefits service is supporting, informing and better understanding the needs and difficulties of private sector and registered social landlords.

5.4.7.1 Gedling Borough Council will continue to work with landlords/agents to ensure effective two-way communication on all welfare benefit issues. Information will be given on occasions of changes in benefits rules/processes.

5.4.7.2 Gedling Borough Council will work in partnership with local groups providing assistance, guidance and free training to their welfare advisors to maximise take up of the benefit scheme.

5.4.7.3 Regular liaison meetings with the Citizens Advice Bureau are held to discuss any benefit issues.

5.4.8 **People who live in deprived areas**

5.4.8.1 Households in areas of deprivation within the Gedling Borough area will be identified using profiling data from a wide range of public and private sources and matched to the information already held on the Council's benefits database and will work to enhance the Council's area based initiative program. These households will then be targeted to encourage them to make a claim for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit.

Action Point 12: *Households who are not already claiming housing and/or council tax benefits in deprived areas will be targeted by regular mail shots.*

5.4.8.2 Second adult rebate is granted under the council tax benefits scheme but is quite different from council tax benefit itself. This benefit can only be claimed by people who do not qualify for the main council tax benefit. It is intended to compensate households for loss of the 25% single person discount. For these reasons, second adult rebate applies if there is a low earner living in the dwelling and the council tax payer is not eligible for benefit in his or her own right. The maximum rebate that can be granted is 25% of the basic bill, equivalent to one 25% adult discount. This amount is tapered according to the income of the second adult. To qualify, the arrangement by which the second adult lives in the home must not be on a commercial basis, i.e., not a lodger or a boarder.

Action Point 13 : *Conduct a Second Adult rebate campaign targeted to areas of deprivation.*

5.4.9 **Black minority and ethnic/migrant workers**

5.4.9.1 In encouraging more people to claim, we need to recognise equality and diversity issues to maximise the income of disadvantaged/minority groups in the district.

Action Point 14 : *Explore partnership working with community groups such as Polish groups etc*

5.4.9.2 The service is completing an equality impact assessment for the service as a whole and will be used to inform this strategy.

5.4.10 **Owner-occupiers**

5.4.10.1 A leaflet will be included with the annual council tax bills to encourage owner-occupiers to apply for council tax benefit. A more targeted campaign, using profiling data will also be conducted for families that are on a low income but not claiming council tax benefit and/or housing benefit.

5.4.11 **Those Suffering Serious Illness**

5.4.11.1 When aware our Visiting Officer team aim to ensure that the maximum entitlement to benefit is awarded.

5.4.12 **Newly Unemployed who have never accessed benefit services**

5.4.12.1 When aware our Visiting Officer team aim to ensure that the maximum entitlement to benefit is awarded.

5.5. **Website/Publicity/Advertising**

5.5.1. The Benefits Service will be promoted through the corporate website. The Council is currently looking to upgrade the website and we will work closely to improve the customer experience.

Action Point 15 : *Implement new improved website*

5.5.2. A dedicated benefits e-mail address is provided and queries will be responded to within forty eight hours.

5.5.3. An on-line benefit application form can be downloaded from the website.

5.5.4. A hyper-link to an interactive benefit calculator is available. This will enable customers to work out approximately what benefit entitlement they may be likely to receive.

- 5.5.5. An on-line interactive benefit application form is available for customers to complete either at home or with an adviser at Gedling 1 Stop. This will be rolled out to the registered social landlords and other organisations that receive and verify Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit forms on behalf of the Council.
- 5.5.6. We will work closely with the Councils Communications team to achieve consistent standards of publicity material.

Action Point 16 : *Work with the Communications Team to review literature design and marketing*

- 5.5.7 In order to raise awareness of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit information will be provided to the public in respect of various Housing/ Council Tax Benefit related matters. Leaflets will be created and distributed throughout various locations in the Gedling Borough area. All leaflets will be available in large print and other formats and languages upon request and updated where necessary on an annual basis, or sooner if applicable.
- 5.5.8. A3 and A4 posters will be created and displayed in all local housing offices and Council owned buildings. These posters will contain limited information but are designed to increase interest and general awareness in the residents of Gedling Borough.
- 5.5.9. Consideration will be given to advertising on local buses, refuse lorries and advertising on beer mats/coasters distributed throughout pubs, clubs & cafes in the Gedling Borough area and making use of the libraries, doctors surgeries, community centres and churches in the community to display leaflets and posters.

Action Point 17 : *Continue to identify new outlets for publicity material to ensure that the maximum number of people can be targeted*

- 5.5.10 Awareness of Council Tax Benefit will be heightened each year when the annual Council Tax Bill is sent.
- 5.5.11. Targeted advertising within local publications will be considered.
- 5.5.12. A translation service is available to customers whose first language is not English.
- 5.5.13. These activities are seen as fundamental to delivering the strategy and will be an on-going action.

Action Point 18 : *Continuous review of the design of the benefit claim form can improve benefit take up. Key issues include ease of use, providing clear advice with examples for guidance and highlighting different contact methods*

5.6. Outreach Work

5.6.1. Direct personal contact with customers is an effective way of increasing confidence and trust in the Benefits Service and is essential in promoting a positive message about Council Tax and Housing Benefit and increasing awareness.

5.6.2. This outreach work is particularly important especially where literacy or limited involvement in the community can be a problem. These events provide an information point for people who would not normally seek the information, don't know what benefits are available to them and don't realise the assistance available to help them claim the benefits they are entitled to.

5.6.3. Activities during the campaign will include:

- Working with the Neighbourhoods and Crime Section at road show events and advice surgeries across the District at the offices of Gedling Borough Council to enable people to gain access to information and advice in a local setting about potential claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
- Venues for future surgeries will be considered at village halls, community centres, local libraries and local supermarkets. The link between ill health and poverty has been widely accepted and holding an advice surgery in a Health Centre may be considered.
- Talks to community groups: Age Concern luncheons, mother and toddler groups, day centres and other social groups within the community will be considered as part of the campaign.
- Information about Housing and Council Tax Benefits, the opportunities for take-up and method of claiming will be promoted in the Council's Contacts Magazine delivered to all households in the District.

5.7. Improving the Claim Process

5.7.1 Sometimes the claim process for Housing/Council Tax Benefit can put people off claiming. The length of the application form and the evidence that is required can confuse people and present a barrier. The Authority's main application form is regularly reviewed and updated to make the claim process as easy as possible. It is currently accredited with the crystal mark.

5.7.2. For customers who are in receipt of Pension Credit the use of the Pension Service's three-page application form makes the claiming of Council Tax Benefit far easier. A three-page form does not present as much of a difficulty or a challenge as the Council's standard 20 or 28 page forms. Customers who claim Pension Credit by phone can also claim housing/council tax benefit at the same time thereby removing the requirement for additional forms to be completed.

5.7.3. An intuitive web based electronic claim form is available and will facilitate a speedier claim process that can be accessed by front line officers, visiting officers at customers homes and partners / agencies that receive and verify claims on behalf of Gedling Borough Council. The claimant will also be able to complete the form at home via the Internet.

Action Point 19 : *Roll out electronic claim form to front line staff, Gedling Homes, Registered Social Landlords, Visiting Officers and launch on the website*

5.8. **Customer Consultation**

5.8.1. In line with the Audit Commission's Key Line of Enquiry 2.4.
- "Are there suitable arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users?" We will aim to make suitable arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of the Council's Benefits service in order to inform how best to deliver the service. This will include a joint venture with other Councils undertaking the CIPFA designed Consultation Survey.

Action Point 20 : *Develop consultation with customers through satisfaction surveys/juries*

5.9. **Staff Awareness /Training**

5.9.1. The Benefits section has a dedicated training officer ensuring that all Benefit and customer contact staff are highly trained and will provide a responsive and helpful service that will make the process easier for people who are reluctant to claim.

5.9.2. Advice and awareness training will be provided to all frontline staff within the council.

5.9.3. Advice and awareness training will be offered to all of our partner organisations on an ongoing basis.

5.9.4 Advice and awareness training will be offered to all wardens employed in the Council's sheltered accommodation facilities.

6. JOINT WORKING

- 6.1. In order to successfully deliver the aims of the take up strategy the Benefits Service relies on the joint working partnerships that have been established with other local authorities, key partners and local organisations. This in itself, however, would not deliver the challenging strategy the Council has set itself to raise awareness and increase take up of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit. The Nottinghamshire authorities have been successful in securing funding from the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership to work collaboratively to conduct an innovative take up campaign that will facilitate a targeted awareness campaign for the hard to reach groups, where the likelihood is that more customers would qualify for benefit if they claimed. In addition by pooling ideas and reviewing approaches to take up, new and innovative methods can be formulated.

Action Point 21 : *Through our participation in the Nottinghamshire Customer Insight Project, a targeted campaign for families on low incomes but not claiming housing/council tax benefit will be conducted.*

7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF STRATEGY ACTIVITIES

- 7.1. It is important to monitor the outcome of the strategy and take up work where it is possible to do so and the impact take up has on resources. All methods of and sources for take up will be monitored to establish the most successful methods for take up amongst hard to reach groups.

Action Point 22 : *Develop computerised monitoring systems to record benefit take up amongst particular groups. Measure and understand the impact that take up campaigns have on the local area to improve upon success and minimise costs associated with less effective promotions*

- 7.2. Progress against the action plan detailed in Appendix 1 will be monitored on a quarterly basis, with the findings and any necessary actions reported to the Head of Corporate Services.
- 7.3. In addition the operation of the strategy will be discussed / reviewed at the Nottinghamshire Housing Benefits Forum bi-annually.

Action Point 23 : *Conduct evaluation of the take up strategy with other Nottinghamshire authorities at the Housing Benefit forums*

- 7.4 The Strategy for Housing and Council Tax Benefits and their take up is an integral part of the delivery. Measures and monitoring on achieving our performance targets are embedded in our section plan and forms part of the overall Council plan. In addition to those national performance measures there are a range of other success criteria that

will be used to ascertain the success of this strategy. These measures along with current and future targets are detailed at Appendix 2.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1. Gedling Borough Council is committed to a benefit and take up strategy that supports its corporate vision.

- 8.2. Gedling Borough Council will work with staff, customers and partners to increase benefit take-up and remove barriers to claiming. A comprehensive action plan will be developed for the delivery of its key objectives in partnership with other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector within the district.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1. An equalities impact assessment has been conducted and informed the formulation of this strategy. The assessment is appended as Appendix 3 (In process of completion)

APPENDIX 1

HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT ACTION PLAN 2010/11 TO 2012/13

		Implementation Date
1.	Develop closer working with the Nottinghamshire County Council's Welfare and Employment Rights Section and Social Care and Health Department (which is now part of the Adults and Housing Department) to identify under-represented groups and co-ordinate joint take up campaigns for various benefits and services.	Ongoing
2.	Develop an effective take up plan with Gedling Homes to identify tenants who may not yet be claiming benefits	July 2010
3.	Maintain regular liaison meetings with stakeholder parties to discuss the benefits service	Ongoing
4.	Develop closer working relationships and partnerships with all of our registered social providers and private landlords and agents through greater use of landlord consultation and forums to ensure effective two way communication on all welfare benefit issues.	March 2011
5.	Consolidate working relationships with local Registered Social Providers so that they are able to assist customers with the completion of the application form and verify information to support the application.	November 2010
6.	Work with the Councils' environment protection team to identify households eligible for support in respect of fuel poverty.	March 2011
7.	Electronic diaries for Visiting Officers to be made available to One Stop staff in order that routine appointments can be made at the first point of contact.	December 2010
8.	Continue to support the aims of the First Contact Scheme	Ongoing
9	Data matching against scan discs provided by the Pension Service to identify where housing and council tax benefit is not being claimed and there is a high chance that if claimed it would be payable.	Ongoing annually
10.	Explore new take up opportunities with the Local Pension Service, attending flu jab clinics and community centres to encourage take up amongst pensioners.	June 2010
11.	Continue to ensure NCC staff are adequately trained	Ongoing
12.	Households who are not already claiming housing and/or council	September

		Implementation Date
	tax benefits in deprived areas will be targeted by regular mail shots.	2010
13.	Conduct a Second Adult Rebate campaign targeted to areas of deprivation	March 2011
14.	Explore partnership working with Community Groups such as Polish groups.	September 2012
15.	Implement new improved website	January 2011
16.	Work with the Communications Team to review literature design and marketing.	Ongoing
17.	Continue to identify new outlets for publicity material to ensure that the maximum number of people can be targeted.	Ongoing
18.	Continuous review of the design of the benefit claim form can improve benefit take up. Key issues include ease of use, providing clear advice with examples for guidance and highlighting different contact methods.	Ongoing
19.	Roll out electronic claim form to front line staff, Gedling Homes, Registered Social Landlords, Visiting Officers and launch on the website.	December 2010
20.	Develop consultation with customers through satisfaction surveys/juries	June 2010
21.	Through our participation in the Nottinghamshire Customer Insight project, a targeted campaign for families on low incomes but not claiming housing/council tax benefit will be conducted.	July 2010
22.	Develop computerised monitoring systems to record benefit take up amongst particular groups. Measure and understand the impact that take up campaigns have on the local area to improve upon success and minimise costs associated with less effective promotions.	Ongoing
23.	Conduct evaluation of the take up strategy with other Nottinghamshire authorities at the Housing Benefit forums	December 2012

APPENDIX 2

HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Performance measure	Target				
	Actual 08/09	Actual to date	10/11	11/12	12/13
NI 180 – The number of changes of circumstances which affect customers' Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit entitlement within the year.(per 1000 caseload)	624	1,210	>450	>450	>450
NI 181 – Time taken to process Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit new claims and change events.	9	12	<11	<10	<9
Average time in days taken to process new claims.	22	23	<20	<19	<18
Average time in days taken to process change in circumstances.	7	10	<8	<8	<8
Percentage of new claims outstanding over 50 days.	2.5%	5%	4%	3%	2.5%
Percentage of new claims decided within 14 days of receiving all information.	96%	92%	96%	96%	96%
Accuracy of processing based on DWP sampling criteria.	98.7%	99.2%	99%	99%	99%
Number of hard to reach claims put into payment (BIMO)	108	338	>150	>150	>100
Total benefit caseload	8,646	9,193	10,000	9,500	9,000



APPENDIX 3

EQUALITY IMPACT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Policy/Service/Procedure to be assessed	The Strategy for Housing and Council Tax Benefits and their take up	
Assessment completed by:	Revenues Services Manager	
Aims/objectives of the Policy/Service/Procedure: To ensure the residents of the borough can make successful benefit claims and receive the maximum amount of benefit they are entitled to.		
Key Performance Indicator	Current Performance	Target
NI 181 – Time taken to process Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit new claims and change events.	12	<11
LI 019 – The number of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) prosecutions and sanctions, per year, per 1000 caseload, in the local authority area.	5.06	4.50
LI 074 – Average time to process new claims (day)	23	<20
LI 075 – Average time to process change of circumstances (day)	10	<8
LI 072 – Number of “hard to reach claims put into payment	367	150
Who are the customers and stakeholders of this service? All residents of the borough, council staff, local advice agencies, members, landlords and any other interested parties.		
Detail below what information you already have about the impact this policy/service/procedure has on the following groups including results from consultation, complaints, census:		

Black and minority ethnic people	The State of the Borough 2008 (SOB) report indicated that Office of National Statistics figures showed that Gedling has an increasing BME population. The report also stated that Gedling has the highest number of workers registering from A8 countries in the EU from amongst the District Councils in Nottinghamshire. Whilst a number of these workers may not reside within the area and there are no accurate details of languages spoken in the Borough it is possible that there may be a language barrier in respect of some residents.
Men/women and trans	Gedling's population is spilt between 49% male and 51% female. Unfortunately there are no figures available on the proportion of trans people in the district.
Disabled people	SOB figures show that around 18% of Gedling's population consider themselves to have a limiting long-term illness. Department of Work and Pensions statistics show that the number of claimants claiming Disability Living Allowance has risen year on year between 2001 and 2006 (the number of claimants in 2006 was 5,025).
Gay/Lesbian/bisexual People	According to the Office for National Statistics no data has been collected in any census. There does not appear to be any other data available.
People from different faiths	Figures from the Office of National Statistics suggest that 1.8% of Gedling's population have stated that their Religious Belief is one other than Christianity (71.8%), however 7.7% did not state their religion and 18.7% of residents said they did not have a religion. This suggests that at least 2,000 of Gedling's residents may be affected, for example these residents may be subject to religious festivals and/or holy days not recognised by the Council's working calendar, which is based on Christian religious festivals.
People of different ages	Gedling has a higher than national average ageing population (SOB), with a 1.3% higher proportion of 65-74 year olds and a 0.9% higher proportion of over 75's.

How will this policy/service/procedure impact on the following groups:		
	Positive impact	Negative impact
Different racial groups	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	May be language barriers for a proportion of these residents.
Men/women and trans	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	May be issues over lone working I respect of visiting officers.
Disabled people	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	These customers may have increased difficulty with access to making a benefit claim, including access to the customer services department.
Gay/Lesbian/bi-sexual people	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	None.
People from different faiths	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	Festivals/Holy days for different religions. Implemented time scales on requested information may fall on these dates.
People of different ages	The strategy is intended to provide a fair and consistent approach to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and its take up in eliminating barriers to claiming benefit. If there are more successful claims, more disposable income, reduces poverty and improves the economy of the borough.	The elderly may have increased difficulty with completing application forms. Under 18's may not be aware of possible council tax liability as from 18 th birthday.

What changes could be made to the policy/service/procedure to address any negative impacts?

Access to services has been adapted physically already to assist the disabled and infirm. A visiting officer service has been made available for all applicants of housing and council tax benefit.

A take up officer has been appointed to encourage residents to apply and make them aware of the scheme and other benefits which they may be entitled to.

Application forms, and correspondence, can be provided in large print, Braille, on audio tape, or in other languages on request. A translation service is also available.

Multi faith calendars are distributed throughout the Council to ensure that all staff are aware of any festivals which may affect customers ability to make contact within the time limits requested.

Advise under 18's of council tax benefit scheme.

The strategy has been developed in collaboration with all the Nottinghamshire District Council and Nottingham City Council to identify areas of best practice and innovation.

Continue the First Contact sign posting scheme.

Continue joint working with the Pension Service and the local Pension Service.

Continue referral system with Nottinghamshire County Council Adult Care Financial Services.

Continue to ensure that officers from Framework Housing Association can provide advice and assistance with benefit claims for their tenants.

Explore partnership working with community groups.

The strategy has been the subject of a Policy Review scrutiny working group and their comments and recommendations have been incorporated.

What monitoring will be carried out to ensure this policy/service/procedure meets diverse needs

What actions will be included in your service plan arising from this assessment?

Action	Outcome	Date?	Who?
Implementation of Housing and Council Tax Benefit action plan 2010/11 to 2012/13	Monitor improvement in claim success	On Going	John Vickers
Consultation with customers through satisfaction surveys/juries.	Improved knowledge of customer base	August 2010	John Vickers
Develop computerised monitoring systems to record benefit take-up amongst particular groups and to measure and understand the impact take-up campaigns have on the local area.	Improved claim success	On Going	John Vickers

Are you satisfied that all aspects of this policy/service/procedure have been thoroughly assessed for all the strands of diversity and that no further investigation is required? Y/N
If no then a fuller impact assessment is required.

Signed...J Vickers.....(manager) Signed.....(Corporate Equality Representative)