

IMPACT ASSESSMENT FORM AND ACTION TABLE

(This form is not intended to be kept to one side –please expand the boxes as appropriate)

Policy/Service Name: Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit & Fraud Investigation

Lead Officer: Paul Lamb/Steve Farmer

Review Date: January 2009

Relevance to the General Duty Assessment

high year 1(08/09)

Section 1 - Aims & Objectives of the Policy/ Service

- To deliver a modern, efficient, effective and secure benefit service which customer-focused, tackles poverty and isolation, and minimises barriers to work.
- Assess benefit claims quickly and accurately and maximise take-up and entitlement by working with our partner organisations and to prevent fraud and error entering the system.
- Ensure that the correct amounts of benefit are paid on time, with proper safeguards against fraud and abuse. Where overpayments of benefit do occur, ensure recovery is made by the most effective methods without causing hardship.
- Provide comprehensive information on benefits so that our customers are informed about their entitlements and enabled to claim and receive benefits.

Section 2 – How is your service delivered?

- Face to face at the customer centre in Minehead and the office at Williton
- Telephone calls
- Email
- Letter
- Home visits
- Website – online functionalities, Browsealoud, Triple A

Information is also available through various publications and leaflets and through the WSC website.

Section 3 – List of key partners/stakeholders who deliver service with you

- West Somerset Advice Bureau
- FAB Team
- Housing Associations
- Private Landlords/Agents
- Job Centre plus
- Community groups
- RB Solutions

Section 4 - Groups that the policy or service is targeted at.

The benefits service is targeted at all residents in West Somerset although Housing Benefit and Council Benefit will be targeted primarily at customers on a low income, and this will particularly include the, elderly, disabled (mobility & sensory), carers, lone parents, young people, customers with learning difficulties.

Section 5 - Evidence and Data used for Assessment

The evidence used for this assessment is a Best Value Survey of benefits service users, conducted over an 8 week period. The survey went out twice and 309 benefits service users responded. It has been used to produce a sample profile and provide satisfaction levels for men, women, BME, disabled and non-disabled service users.

In addition targeted consultation (Polish Community, Women, Older people and Disabled people) by the Council and by other councils in the South West (see appendix 1) has been used.

Also staff discussions and feedback during the equality & diversity training which was carried out between Sept – Jan 08/09.

Community Profile from Census 2001

Currently, there is no process to record service complaints & compliments apart from the corporate process.

Section 6 - Conclusions drawn about the impact of service/policy/function on different groups highlighting negative impact or unequal outcomes

The service user profile appears to reflect the community profile and expected claimants in terms of age and disability. There is not a clear enough picture for single men and women, single parent families and families and the BME profile at 1.6% could be lower than expected given the increased migrant population since the 2001 census. Gypsy and Travellers are not properly identified. Service profiling from the benefits claims will need to be used to begin to assess the picture more accurately. The age and disability profile will need to be benchmarked against the 'family' of local authorities for the next EIA.

Gender (Men/women, single parents/carers)

There are more women claimants than men which maybe because women take on this task within the family and there are more single female parent families. Over all areas covered by the Best Value survey women were less satisfied than men. This is additionally significant in that research shows generally men are nearly always less satisfied than women as they have higher expectations. A possible reason for their greater dissatisfaction is the complexity of the process for women with children who have split up with male partners. Some non-benefits specific consultation with women suggests that benefits staff can make women feel uncomfortable about making a claim, privacy in the interview process is not always guaranteed. However this needs further consultation particularly with women.

Occasionally a customer might ask for a member of staff from a particular gender, this can be accommodated.

The Council operates an home working policy in that it can potentially offer staff the opportunity to balance work with other aspects of their life, in particular care responsibilities. This will ensure that individuals who previously would not have been able to enter or remain in work would now have the opportunity to do so

Some staff have not always been comfortable with Transgender clients.

Age

The age groups consistently less satisfied were the 16 -24 and 25-34 and in some areas the 35-54 group experience lower levels of satisfaction with the service. It is likely that for 16 -24 lower satisfaction levels are about limited entitlement for 16-18 year olds.

For 25-34 and 35-54 it is thought that opening times are a problem for those who work. Greater levels of self employment in West Somerset also contributes to the complexity for this group in making claims.

West Somerset has approx 30% of its residents over the age of 60, this is higher than the South West average of 24%. A large number of elderly benefit customers have difficulty with hearing. However, staff have not had training in how to use type talk or how to use the hearing loops. Also, staff are unsure how to request documents in Braille or alternative formats.

Out of the Aging Well Event in October 2008, feedback from participants highlighted difficulties with accessing/understanding information and how to find out about benefit entitlements

The elderly tend to have more difficulty with the complexities of the forms for claiming benefits and understanding the entitlement letters. The use of the computer software prevents the changing of the notification letters, so a supplementary information sheet is being developed and consulted upon to endeavour to make the entitlement letters easier to decipher.

A home visiting officer is available for the elderly and disabled and this needs to be promoted.

Race

The BME service profile figures and satisfaction levels are lower. The numbers are very small but consultation with Polish communities confirms issues with benefits in terms of the difficulty with the forms and leaflets, need for translated information. There is also a need for better simple information about entitlement especially that relates to hours worked.

Whilst most our documents offer to be translated into another language most staff did not know how to do this or who to ask. We have had no requests for documentation to be translated, which suggests if we promoted such a service this would be used more. The use of a translation service needs to be promoted and guidance issued to all staff.

Gypsy and Travellers do not appear within the service figures. However, the issues are there is a discrepancy between what rent is chargeable on Gypsy sites and the amount of benefit received. New statutory changes in April will equalise this situation.

Disability

All our offices are fully accessible to disabled customers.

Disabled service users which make up 46% of the profile and are consistently more satisfied than non-disabled benefit claimants. The only area at the time of the survey, were lower levels of satisfaction with being transferred between staff (not shown in appendix). However, this was due to previous changes in the procedures. Staff have since received training.

The community profile suggests that 23% of West Somerset residents have a disability or have a limited long term illness compared to 18% in Somerset. The West Somerset profile can be further broken down as 7% of residents having a sight/visual impairment, 14% with a physical disability and 7% with a learning disability.

We have little information about customers with learning disability or mental health issues and more engagement needs to be undertaken to define how we best provide information to these groups.

There is no data for **Sexual Orientation or Faith**. The service is aware of the entitlement changes to be made as a result of civil partnerships and that there needs to be awareness about polygamy in some faiths and different cultural expectations.

Further data will be collected in the future.

Rural Isolation & Customer Access

We are aware that for some of our customers the rural nature of the district and accessing our offices and services can be problematic especially for those with limited financial means. There are plans to extend the current electronic functionality to include the ability to complete application forms online.

In 2008 a benefits outreach service for rural areas was trialled by using the CLOWNS bus.

The service provides a visiting service for the elderly and disabled but this needs to be promoted.

The use of text messaging is being implemented.

Overall

Overall the survey showed fairly consistently high levels of staff friendliness. Levels of respect matched the overall levels of satisfaction.

Section 7 - After discussion with Staff & Management, list comments, criticisms or alternative approaches suggested regarding the impact of service/policy/function.

Customer Access

Anecdotal evidence from the staff training indicates a proportion of customers with low literacy levels. These people would find the completion of forms and deciphering benefit entitlement letters difficult.

The Benefits service does not offer out of office hours. Although home visiting is offered this is not promoted. There are very limited campaigns to specific groups to promote take up.

The form and information remain too complicated for all groups and requires simplification.

Monitoring Data (Knowing Your Community and Service Profiling)

While the service does collect some service user profiling information it has not been used systematically to inform access to the service. Community profiling is being developed by the Council but not yet used systematically.

Section 8 - How will the service/policy/function be amended and how will you be able to show progress on the identified issues?

- Develop a promotion campaign including to targeted and hard to reach groups
- There is an emerging Eastern European client base. Have subscribed to national leaflet scheme, and requested investigation into the production of hard copies in all languages, and by Braille or large print.
- Benefits supplementary information sheet developed and consulted upon
- Customer facing staff need to be aware of interpreter facilities and trained in the use of hearing loops and type talk
- Information sheets will be made available to under 25's and migrants explaining simply about their entitlement
- Build access standards (font 12) into leaflets, forms and communication documents
- Pilot Saturday opening at the Minehead Contact Centre
- A further consultation/customer feedback exercise will be carried out in the next 2 months
- Interrogate software and attempt to break live caseload by age bands, 16-24, 25-39, 40-49, 60-74, and 75. Compare against West Somerset Profile
- Disaggregated reports will be pulled off regularly to inform service planning and improvement
- Investigate use of 'Style Writer' software which simplifies letters and stops use of jargon.

Section 9 - How will the assessment, consultation & outcomes be published & communicated?

- Benefits Service Plan
- Presented to staff at team meeting
- Presented to CMT on ???
- Corporate Improvement Plan
- Published on the website under Equality web page

Completed by:

(Please print name)

Signed off by:

Corporate Equalities Officer

Date:

Service Specific/ Corporate	Issue	Equality Group	Action	Who	By when
Customer Access & Responsive Services					
Corporate Customer Services	Limited signage about access to services e.g. translation, home visits	All	Improve signage and website	Wendy Bass	2009/10
Corporate Customer Services	No private interview space in West Somerset House	All	Take issue to CMT	Wendy Bass	COMPLETE
Corporate Customer Services & Benefits Service	Limited publicity & promotion of access to services targeted to specific groups	Gender /Race/Age	Specific take up campaigns Schools(Families/single parent and teenagers) Young People Older people	Jo Ross	2009/10
Corporate Customer Services & Benefits Service	Not all staff aware of councils interpreter facilities and how to arrange for information in alternative formats. Also, limited understanding of how hearing loop, text talk works	Disability/Age/ Race	Provide training to staff	Wendy Bass	2009/10
Benefits service	Poor out of office hours service	Gender & Age	Pilot Saturday morning opening times	Paul Lamb	2010
Benefits Service	Entitlement for migrant communities and young people poor	Race and Age	Produce specific information sheets and promote Crib sheets	Jo Ross/Debbie Flynn	2009 -
Corporate Customer Services	Investigate how to provide information to those with low literacy levels		Investigate use of Easy Read, Use of symbols. Improve information that gets sent with notifications . Consider use of	Paul Lamb/Wendy Bass/IS Team	2009/10

Service Specific/ Corporate	Issue	Equality Group	Action	Who	By when
			software to simplify letters, Stylewriter		
Knowing Your Community and Service Profiling					
Benefits Services	Limited use of service profiling	All	Include diversity questions with application form and pull off reports	Paul Lamb	2009/10
Consultation and Engagement					
Benefits Service	Women less satisfaction than men with the service	Gender & All	Consultation and feedback process developed to understand difference in women's satisfaction levels and follow up satisfaction and issues with all groups	Tom Bown	Commencing March 09