

# West Somerset Council Benefits Service

## Introduction

West Somerset Council's benefit service is committed to providing our customers with the highest possible standards, which meet your needs.

This document describes the standards the service is committed to providing to you

## Listening to our Customers

We listen to customer views through various forms, feedback from telephone enquiries, complaints and surveys. We welcome comments or suggestions about our service as they help us to find out where we are going wrong and what we are doing right.

The service is continually seeking the opinions of our customers about the service that you have received, and use this information to shape future service developments. If you would like to provide feedback on the service that you have received please click on the following links:

[The Benefits Service](#) or [The Visiting Service](#)

## The service

- Administration and payment of Housing Benefit
- Administration of Council Tax Benefit
- Home visits and advice for benefit claimants
- Preventing and investigating potentially fraudulent claims
- Identifying and recovering overpaid benefit.

## Statement of Intent

### We want to:

- Provide a modern, efficient, effective, and secure benefit delivery service, which is customer-focused, tackles poverty and isolation, and minimises barriers to work.
- Assess benefit entitlement quickly and accurately.
- Reduce levels and risks of fraud and error by upholding full compliance with the Security Guidance Manual.
- Provide comprehensive information to the public on benefits so they are told about their entitlements and enabled to claim and receive benefits.
- Provide clear explanations of how we reach decisions on claims; including information about appeal rights.
- Ensure we pay the correct amounts of benefit on time, with proper safeguards against fraud and abuse. Where overpayments of benefit do occur, ensure that we recover it by the most effective methods without causing hardship.
- Achieve targets in line with National indicators 180 / 181 and Local Performance Indicators.
- Ensure the departments resources are managed economically, efficiently and effectively at all levels, and maintain financial and management information systems.

## West Somerset Council Benefits Service

- Encourage and develop staff at all levels by creating an environment that encourages both personal development and participation in creating and achieving of aims and objectives.
- Impose a robust anti-fraud strategy to protect public funds and to ensure that we deliver benefits to those who have a true entitlement to them.
- Provide the facility to make a claim for benefit online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by answering simple but appropriate questions

### The standard of service you can expect from us

We are committed to providing a modern, efficient and cost effective service focused on meeting our customers' needs in a friendly, timely and accurate manner.

We will be readily accessible to everyone in the community to increase social inclusion, reduce barriers to work and help people to live in decent housing.

By April 2010 you will be able to make a claim directly to the Authority 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by the Authority's web site. You will have the choice of either making your application by completion of a form, or electronically by answering a series of appropriate questions

Where we can help customers through the award of benefit, we will process claims quickly and accurately, while actively reducing the incidences of fraud or error through investigation. Where fraudulent intent is proven, we will seek to apply suitable sanctions as a deterrent against future activity.

All of our forms, leaflets and correspondence will be written in clear, simple language, with the minimum use of jargon. We will aim to provide them to you in a format or language of your choice

Where we seek to collect money, we will issue bills within 5 working days of actioning the change. We will not insist on repayment until your appeal rights have expired and clearly you do not wish to appeal against the decision. Where we need to take recovery, we will act quickly, fairly and impartially, but with due regard to social welfare and human rights of our customers.

We will promote the availability of benefits to all.

### Benefits Visiting Service

If you need help in completing one of our forms for Housing or Council Tax Benefit and would find it difficult to get in to one of our offices we can arrange for a Benefits Officer to visit you in your home.

They will be able to help with completing your form and gather the needed evidence to go with it.

For more information about this service or to make an appointment for a home visit contact us on 01643 703704 and ask for the benefits visiting officer. If they are unavailable at the

## West Somerset Council Benefits Service

time we will take your contact details and the visiting officer will contact you when they can to book a suitable appointment

### When you come to see us:

- If you wish to discuss matters privately, we will offer you an appointment in a private interview room
- If we can't answer your query when you come to visit us, we will tell you when we have the information you need

### When you telephone us:

- We will try to answer your query but if we need more time to get the information we will ring you back within one working day.

### If we visit you :

- If you ask us to visit, we will arrange a time that is convenient for you.
- If we have an appointment, we will visit you within 15 minutes of the time arranged
- Our staff will carry identification. Telephone us on 01643 703704 if you want to confirm the Visiting Officer's identity.

### When you write to or e-mail us :

- We will answer all your questions and tell you who to contact if you need more information.
- We will write using plain, clear language

### If you need special help:

- If you have a disability or any other special need that means you cannot come to see us, we can arrange for someone to visit you
- If you have difficulty using English we can arrange for a translator to help you.

### Performance Targets

As well as the standards of service we aim to meet, there are targets for the work we do. These include:

- The number of days to process a new benefit claim or change of circumstance – target 8.5 days
- The percentage of claims we calculate correctly – target 95%
- Ensuring we pay the right benefit to the right person by identifying incorrect entitlements – target identifying 1,954 incorrect entitlements per 1,000 customers between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011
- The number of fraud prosecutions and sanctions achieved (local Performance Indicator) – target 12

## West Somerset Council Benefits Service

- The percentage of new claims taking more than 40 days to assess – Target less than 6%
- Percentage of responders who are either satisfied or very satisfied with the service – Target Over 90 %
- Annual Additional benefit identified by dedicated take up campaigns – Target £5,000

We regularly measure our performance against these targets and compare our results with other District Councils.

### Your right to equal treatment

West Somerset Council is committed to giving an equal service to all. This means that customers should not be treated any differently because of their gender, race, age, disability, sexual orientation or religion. Our equalities impact assessment is available on our website -<http://www.westsomersetonline.gov.uk/getattachment/Advice---Benefits/Benefits/Benefits-Equality-Assessment.pdf.aspx>

### Your right to complain

Things can go wrong, and we can make mistakes. If you are not happy with the service you have received, or the way we have treated you, we want to know. This helps us to improve the service we provide.

It is best to try to settle the complaint directly at the time you are unhappy with the service.

You can:

- Write to West Somerset Council, West Somerset House, Killick Way, Williton, Taunton, Somerset, TA4 4QA
- Email us at [benefits@westsomerset.gov.uk](mailto:benefits@westsomerset.gov.uk)
- Complete the on-line form on our website

### How you can help us to help you

- Fully complete our forms and include all the needed supporting evidence
- Answer our letters quickly
- Give us accurate and complete information
- Tell us immediately when your circumstances change
- Pay back any recoverable overpayments
- Try to let us know in advance if you need an interpreter so we can make sure someone is available.
- Recognise we provide a service within nationally set rules and be polite and courteous to us. **If you use abusive language or behaviour towards our staff or other customers, we will ask you to leave the building or end your telephone call.**

# West Somerset Council Benefits Service

## Further information

For further information about Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, please visit the West Somerset Council Website at [www.westsomersetonline.gov.uk](http://www.westsomersetonline.gov.uk) or telephone (01643) 703704

The logo for West Somerset Council features a large, light grey rounded rectangle on the left side. To its right is a stylized cross symbol composed of four rounded squares meeting at a central point. The text 'WEST SOMERSET COUNCIL' is written in white, bold, uppercase letters across the bottom of the large rounded rectangle.

**WEST  
SOMERSET  
COUNCIL**