

A T A M E E T I N G
- of the -
**BENEFITS SERVICE WORKING
GROUP** held at the Council House,
Walsall, on **Wednesday, 7 April
2004, at 6.00 p.m.**

PRESENT

Councillor Nazir (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs. Shires

Miss E. Kennedy – Head of exchequer
Mr. J. Evitts – Head of benefits
Mr. F. Powell – Constitutional services officer

APOLOGY

An apology for non-attendance at the meeting was submitted on behalf of
Councillor Sarohi.

NOTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 MARCH 2004

Decision

That the notes of the meeting held on 9 March 2004, a copy having
previously been circulated to each member of the working group, be approved and
signed by the chairman as a correct record.

DRAFT CUSTOMER SURVEY FORM

A revised draft customer survey form was circulated to all members present
at the meeting.

Mr. Evitts advised the working group that the purpose of the survey was to
establish whether there were any particular problems for customers completing
benefit application forms and to ascertain what type of benefit was requested so that
it is possible to deal with each enquiry quickly and accurately.

The working group was advised that the new benefits enquiry centre seemed to be heavily used on Mondays and Tuesdays.

The working group was asked whether there were any details in the draft customer survey form which they would wish to be changed before it was provided to customers for their completion. Members indicated that they thought the form should have an improved layout with greater spacing and that a position should be provided for applicants to complete the form and a member of staff be available to help and give advice to benefit applicants.

Decision

- (1) That the working group support the use of the survey form and request that officers ensure that it has a clearer format and investigate the logistical arrangements for the use and completion by benefits service customers;
- (2) That a question be added to the customer access survey form – Why did you chose to visit us today?

COMPLETION OF BENEFIT CLAIM FORM – EXISTING CLAIM FORM AND BENEFIT FRAUD INSPECTORATE MODEL CLAIM FORM

Mr. Evitts advised the working group that both the model claim form for claiming housing benefits and Council tax benefit form from the Department of Works and Pensions and the application forms for housing benefit and/or council tax benefit provided by the Council were seeking to obtain the same information, but the style of the application forms were different. Mr. Evitts confirmed that the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate advocated the use of the Department of Works and Pensions model application form.

The attention of members was drawn to the notes to aid applicants complete the Council tax benefit application forms.

Councillor Nazir commented that he thought the layout of the model form from the Department of Works and Pensions was easier for applicants to follow than the existing form used by the Council.

Decision

The working group agreed to defer consideration of the Walsall MBC housing benefit/Council tax benefits and the model housing benefit and Council tax benefit claim forms so that members have the opportunity to complete both claim forms so that the following can be established:-

- The clarity of the questions asked and the information requested from the benefits service customers
- Any ambiguity when comparing the information requested in the two application forms

SUBSIDY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VERIFICATION FRAMEWORK

Mr. Evitts advised members that the verification framework was a system which had been developed by the Department of Works and Pensions to help filter out errors and fraud. He said that the framework set out a standard for the processing of benefit claim forms and that compliance was not mandatory but its use was recommended strongly by the Department for Works and Pensions, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and the Audit Commission.

The working group was advised that the verification framework was an important consideration when the Council was subject to external inspections and this was recognised within the housing and council tax benefits performance standards framework which was used as a basis for scoring the benefits service as part of each Council's comprehensive performance assessment. Members were informed that compliance with the framework allowed authorities to enter into agreements with registered social landlords for them to verify information to support benefit claims.

The working group was informed that there were three modules within the verification framework and that the Department for Works and Pensions provided additional subsidy payments towards the re-set-up costs and on-going costs. The three modules relate to the following areas:-

- Reviews
- New Claims
- Visiting

Members were advised that from 1st April 2004, there would no longer be a requirement to review all benefit claimants and that the review module replaced the previous module and focused on claimants at risk of a change of circumstances. Such cases would be identified by the Department of Works and Pensions.

Mr. Evitts said that the Department of Works and Pensions was still issuing guidance on the operation of the new review module and it was anticipated that a list of cases to be selected for review would be received during late April/early May 2004. Mr. Evitts confirmed that he would provide a copy of the verification framework briefing note to each member of the working group.

Decision

- (1) That a copy of the briefing on the verification framework be circulated to members of the working group;
- (2) That a report on the details of the verification framework home visits arrangements used by those Councils with excellent /beacon status be submitted to the next meeting of the working group.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 6.58 p.m.

Chairman:

Date: