



MHJ Wins IRRV's Most Improved Team of the Year 2019

After fighting off stiff competition, our MHJ team gained national recognition on 9 October 2019 at the IRRV (Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation) awards, by winning the most improved team of the year in the Welfare Benefit category.

The event was held in Telford Shropshire, where areas of improvement had been demonstrated in:

- speed at which claims were dealt with
- quality of work
- staff development
- working with partners for the wider good of customers
- use of modern technology to interact and assist customers
- continuous development of the service

Money Home Job consists of a number of teams:

- Council Tax
- Business Rates
- Housing Benefits
- Customer Contact
- Free School Meals
- Housing Standards and Improvement
- Housing and Welfare Services
- Systems Support and Business Administration

Message from System Leader, Elise Hopkins

I am extremely proud of the success and improvements made within MHJ.

We have restructured our Housing and Welfare teams in order to better meet and deal with the complex needs of some of our customers. We have fully embraced Perform Plus and have a new way of working and sharing information together.

I am encouraged by the positive discussions I am hearing within the daily huddles as we continue to maintain the principles of Perform Plus during our second 100 Day Plan.

We still have lots to do, but I am confident that we are well equipped to deal with what comes our way. Please keep up the good work.

The purpose of the newsletter is to:

- Improve communication within MHJ
- Promote best practices within the MHJ team
- Build on team morale
- Celebrate our successes



Walsall Council

Housing Benefits



We have continued to build on our success and achieved the following:

- Landlord manual schedules and letters have now moved to the landlord portal from 3 February 2020, resulting in savings in printing and postage costs. 22% reduction in benefit letters (CTR letter decision helped this) 16% reduction in ctax bills/letters due to online and text campaigns etc.
- This will also reduce the unnecessary routine enquiries landlords need to make if they can access the information themselves.
- Customers are now able to upload evidence in support of claims anytime on the Citizens Access Portal. This means that customers will now be able to send the necessary proofs to us, which will automatically be indexed directly to their claim.
- Online activity for Revs & Bens increased by 37% in the last 12 months
- Number of days to process new apps – 11 – (17 national average)
- Number of days for changes – 5 (national average 6)
- 48.5% reduction in benefits work outstanding compared to the same time last year
- We have brought 41% of changes back in house following improvements in efficiency and productivity.
- Our finance team have identified and successfully claimed back over £800k in Housing Benefit subsidy from the DWP.
- We continue to encourage customers to sign up for online services and to date 2015 benefit customers are registered for online notification letters. This will again save on postage and printing costs.
- 1000 Revenues accounts signed up for e-billing.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

What is a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP)

There are regulations that allow us to provide additional financial support to residents receiving Housing Benefit or Housing Element of Universal Credit, this can be awarded for the following reasons:

- Struggling to meet shortfall between their rental liability and payment of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit
- Help with arrears to prevent eviction
- Help with rent in advance/deposits to assist with priority moves
- Help with moving costs – removals etc

How can customers/third parties apply for a DHP

We now have an online DHP application form on our website, this form is easy to complete and asks for income and expenditure information. This allows us to assess financial hardship and provide additional support to improve their financial situation, for example reducing high tariffs, looking for better deals on insurances, gas and electric etc.

Customers are able to upload supporting evidence at the time of completing the DHP application form to ensure their application is ready to process when received by an officer. The form prompts customers with the information they will need to provide.

Other online services within MHJ

We have recently introduced online services within our Revenues & Benefits department, please see below a summary of the services available:

Benefits

- Online new application form for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction
- Online Change of Circumstances form – including change of address
- Request to register for online benefit decision letters
- Upload evidence for your benefit claim – customers/landlords can upload evidence to their claims online
- View your benefit entitlement breakdown via your council tax online account

Council Tax

- Register for an online Council Tax account – view your account information, update contact details, view balances and instalments
- Register for e-billing
- Sign up or amend your direct debit
- Make payments online
- Apply or end your single person discount
- Request discount/exemptions for students or the severely mentally impaired
- Tell us you have moved
- Upload evidence requested direct to your council tax account

We also have online services for business rates (NNDR) – customers can sign up for online accounts, amend or pay by direct debit and request e-billing.

Housing Standards & Improvement Team

New(ish) starters

The following staff have all started in the team delivering a range of services:

Housing Improvements:

Sharmin Rahman –
Architectural Assistant

Housing Standards:

Sharon Hendricks
Ola Moyegun
Ilinca Gavriluc

Grant success

Appollo and the Standards Team have secured a range of grants from different external bodies in the last 6 months including:

- **Tackling Rogue Landlords** – range of schemes to put more pressure on those rogues who continue to provide unsafe homes for people in the borough
- **Fuel Switch Scheme** – support to enable households living in fuel poverty to have new cost effective heating systems. This project led by Mark England is being undertaken in partnership with E-on Energy

Tackling terrible housing conditions

The Standards Team are continuing to serve a range of legal notices and fines against those private landlords who fail to ensure their homes are safe for people to live in. This work includes use of civil penalty notices which can be up to £30,000 and listing of landlords on the National Database of Rogue Landlord and Agents.

Exam Successes

Congratulations to **Maneesha Chaunkria** and **Louie Gannon** who recently passed the IRRV Level 3 Certificate in Revenues and Welfare Benefits.

Lynn Penn successfully completed the IRRV Diploma in Revenues and Benefits.

National recognition for delivering Aids and Adaptations

The Housing Improvements Team which has previously been commended at the national awards for Home Adaptation Service of the Year and Excellence in Improving Services for customers has two more awards:

- **Bill Weston received Technical Officer of the Year award at the National Healthy Housing Awards run by the influential national charity Foundations in London. In 2018/19 alone he oversaw delivery of 497 major Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), 142 minor adaptation cases and major adaptations to 13 community centres (£230,000+).**
- **Phil Cox received a commendation in the Caseworker category for his excellent work too.**

Both recognise that their awards are part of a whole team effort.

Carbon Monoxide – prevent the silent killer

There is a new online training tool for all staff especially those who do home visits to help reduce the risk of accidental poisoning from Carbon Monoxide (CO). There are around 60 deaths from accidental CO poisoning in England and Wales a year.

Collective Fuel Switching

The energy team continue to promote a range of options for staff and households to reduce their home energy bills. One includes the popular collective switch scheme that is run by ichoosr <https://bigcommunityswitch.co.uk/walsall/register>

Council Tax and Business Rates

Collection Rates

Council Tax

As at the end of January 2020 we have collected £119m of the 2019/20 council tax liability. The equates to 85.2% of the total charge.

For previous years we have collected the following amounts.

Year	Total Collected	% of total	Amount collected in 19/20
2018/19	£126.9m	96.5%	£2.8m
2017/18	£120.1m	97.3%	£618k
2016/17	£112.2m	97.8%	£307k
2015/16	£106.4m	98.2%	£164k

Business Rates

89.3% of this year's charge has already been collected (£66.9m). We have also collected £71.9m of last year's charge (98.5%). Regarding earlier years we have collected 98.7% of the 17/18 charge, 98.6% of 16/17 and 98.9% of 15/16.

Investigations, Data Matching, Supported Accommodation, Appeals Team



Investigations

The Team waved goodbye to one of its longest serving members at the end of 2019 – Rachel Myatt will be missed for all her qualities and professionalism and for all she brought to the team as a person – we wish her well for her future

Fraud prevention and Investigation techniques are an ever evolving process and we will continue to embrace new methods and tools as they become available

NFI 2018/19 Exercise Update

The biannual exercise is close to completion ahead of the 2020/21 exercise (due to commence in October 2020) – work is ongoing to complete the High risk referrals ahead of the deadline date of the 31st March 2020 for its completion.

The exercise has identified a number of concerns across cases involving self-employed income and childcare costs and further analysis of this area will be undertaken post exercise to correct cases that fit this category.

HBMS/Data-matching

New rules and an automation process are in production and the DWP's Housing Delivery Division have recently provided an insight in to how they see this area of work moving forward in light of the extension to the UC roll-out – the team will identify the impact of the new rules and incorporate them in to its working practices.

Supported & Exempt Accommodation

A full analysis of the subsidy costs is a high priority for the team currently and we are receiving a number of applications from new providers to the Borough that require detailed engagement to establish if appropriate criteria is met or not.

We are also working to improve the knowledge base of our staff in this complex area to allow for additional support during peak pressure periods.

Our aim is to ensure that the highest quality of housing provision and care support is provided for the most vulnerable of our customers at a reasonable cost.

Appeals

Work continues on our Submission reports to the HMCTS and we are examining the recent recommendations within the LGO report on Housing Benefit Complaints & Appeals to consider if we need to incorporate any of these in to our Appeals procedures.

Business Support Systems Team

The System Support Team are currently going through the annual billing period, this involves fully testing all the annual upratings and amending the parameters to the Northgate system,

We are due to implement Planet Press LIVE from 2/3/20. Phase 1 will be to issue all Revenue & Benefits notification letters from Northgate through Planet Press for annual billing and then on a daily basis. The second phase is to introduce Bill and Ben, that is enveloping customers letters together if they have a Council Tax Bill and a Benefit Letter currently sent separately. This will be a savings in postal costs.

Customer services Team

The Customer Services Team continue to support customers to access online services, we have seen a steady stream of customers using the service

- The team have held a number of problem solving sessions with housing benefits and council tax officers to further support customers wanting to access online services.
- Will shortly be conducting a snap survey regarding customer using online services
- Planning officers are now calling their own tickets on FSS
- New signage will soon be in FSS to make it clearer to customers where to go for help

Benefit Finance Team

The Finance Team is working towards the year end reconciliation process to ensure that the authority will submit a fairly stated subsidy/DHP grant claim. this includes the preparation of the grant claim for 2019/20 (to be submitted by the end of April 2020) also reconciliation and monitoring of the DHP fund.

The grant claim for 2018/19 was a success without qualification and we managed to secure an additional £824,783.59 from the DWP for the previous year.

Housing and Welfare Team

Walsall Council awarded £555,000 from Central Government to continue progressive work with Rough Sleepers

Walsall Council has recently received over half a million pounds from MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) after a successful bid to continue its progressive work with rough sleepers in the borough.

MHCLG awarded the council £555,837 - the second highest Local Authority allocation in the West Midlands with only Birmingham City Council receiving more. The money will continue to support the 'Rough Sleeper Initiative' (RSI) in Walsall and wider wrap around services. This includes the temporary accommodation at the town centre's 'Night Shelter' and support from the Outreach Navigator Service – a council partnership that helps rough sleepers' access health care and suitable accommodation.

The Rough Sleeper Initiative also complements Walsall's flagship 'Housing First' service - which helps former rough sleepers into tenancies. In the last two years nearly fifty people have been housed. The service also provides the

option of linking in with professional support to address any addiction issues. These initiatives have made a big difference in the borough. In the last three years' the numbers in Walsall have gone from twenty-six recorded rough sleepers in 2016 – to six in 2019.

Councillor Adrian Andrew, Deputy Leader at Walsall Council, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Strategic Housing said:

"We are very pleased that MHCLG has awarded us our full bid. Rough sleepers are amongst the most vulnerable people in society and this award will help them get the expert and continued help that they need."

We know from wider evidence based research that with continued and targeted care from specialist health and housing partners, lives can be saved, and changed by sustainable steps that lead to more hopeful futures."

"But there is still much work to be done. The reasons behind the issue are complex and will often include addictions and family breakdowns. The Council can only do so much on its own, it's partnership that is the key. The contribution of the voluntary, Housing Association and health sectors has been incredible."



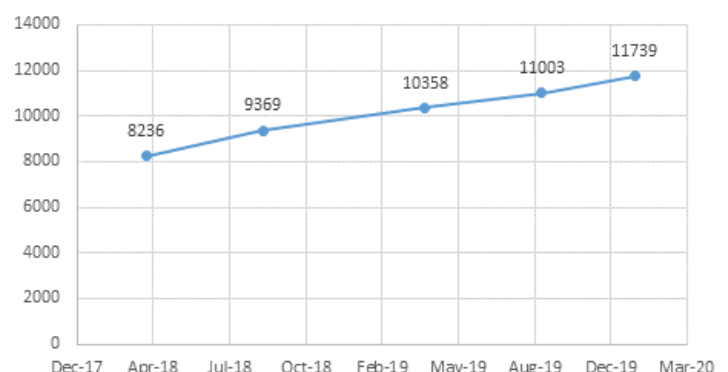
The Free School Meals Team/Early Years Pupil Premium

The team are proactive at maximizing the number of pupils registered for free school meals and as a result Walsall still has a higher than national average number of pupils eligible for and claiming free school meals.

This means that more money is available to schools to help raise the educational attainment levels of disadvantaged children.

The free schools Meal Team have continued to see an increase in the number of children registered for free school meals as shown in the graph.

FSM increase since the start of UC rollout



Housing First Project Hits Sunday Times

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NEWS

'Boris should end rough sleeping. Here's how'

A pioneering strategy to prevent homelessness deserves to be rolled out nationally, says the West Midlands' Tory mayor

Caroline Wheeler and
Rosamund Urwin

Boris Johnson is facing pressure to address the homelessness crisis, with a call by a leading Conservative from the party's new heartland for the introduction of a pioneering rough-sleeping strategy across the country.

The most senior Tory outside London, Andy Street – mayor of the West Midlands and a former managing director of the department store chain John Lewis – urged Johnson to adopt a solution to rough sleeping known as Housing First, which has been tested in his region and northwest England.

He also challenged Johnson to end a freeze on benefits, and address the national shortage of affordable homes. His call is part of a revolt by regional mayors, including London's Sadiq Khan and Greater Manchester's Andy Burnham, over homelessness.

Johnson is said to regard homelessness as one of the big

challenges facing his government. The number of homeless people in England has risen to 280,000, up 23,000 since 2016, according to the charity Shelter. The Office for National Statistics says 726 people died on the streets of England and Wales last year.

The Housing First strategy comes from Finland, where homelessness has been slashed by 40% in a decade. It is the only country in Europe where rough sleeping is falling. The scheme involves rough sleepers being given a home with an unconditional tenancy alongside intensive support to help them recover from problems such as substance abuse and mental ill-health.

Street, who visited the Finnish capital, Helsinki, to see how it works, said a £9.6m pilot project it inspired in the West Midlands was "proving a success" and had given 132 rough sleepers a home.

In an appeal to the prime minister, Street said: "I believe the scheme, which not only provides a roof over the heads of the most vulnerable, but also puts a support network in place, can provide a blueprint for how the new government can tackle rough sleeping across the country. I would urge the prime minister to consider a nationwide rollout."

He urged Johnson to address the "underlying issues that are fuelling homelessness" by raising the local housing allowance, a part of univer-

sal credit, which has not risen since 2016. "The new government must address both the rate of the local housing allowance and the number of affordable homes being built if we are to resolutely address this dreadful situation," he said.

The crisis was laid bare last week when a 30-year-old homeless woman gave birth to premature twins in the street outside Trinity College in Cambridge, the university's wealthiest college, two days before Christmas. The fate of the mother and babies is not known.

Burnham accused Johnson of using homelessness as a "PR stunt" after the prime minister announced an extra £3m to tackle rough sleeping last week. The mayor of Greater Manchester said: "Concern about homelessness needs to be for life and not just for Christmas. It was very frustrating to see the prime minister using this issue for a Christmas PR stunt when it is an issue that Conservative policies have created and when what we actually need is substantial direct action rather than gimmicks."

He wants to see the Housing First initiative used nationally, along with his own £6m-a-year "Bed Every Night" scheme, which he claims has contributed to a 37% drop in homelessness in the past year.

Like Street, he called for the housing component of universal credit to be increased. He also urged an end to the bedroom tax, which penalises benefit claimants for having spare rooms.

Khan, who opened City Hall on Christmas Eve to 100 homeless Londoners, termed the crisis a "national disgrace".

Street: blueprint
to help homeless



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