



**RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY
AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

23 SEPTEMBER 2004

**AGENDA
ITEM**

BENEFITS SERVICE WORKING GROUP

Ward(s) All

Portfolio: Councillor J.G. O'Hare - resources performance management

Summary of report:

This report summarises progress made by the working group at its meeting on 21 September 2004.

Background papers: None.

Recommendation:

The panel is requested to consider the findings of the working group from its meeting on 21 September 2004.

Reason for scrutiny:

The working group was established to scrutinise a range of benefits issues with a view to making recommendations to improve customer access and service delivery.

Signed:

Executive director: Carole Evans

Date: 22 September 2004

Resource and legal considerations:

The group does not fall within the political balance requirement set out in the Local Government and Housing Act, 1989.

Citizen impact:

Successful scrutiny will contribute to improving the council's performance and service delivery to service users and other stakeholders.

<p>Equality implications:</p> <p>All citizens with a relevant interest in a matter will have the ability to contribute to the deliberations of a scrutiny and performance panel.</p>
<p>Environmental impact:</p> <p>Successful scrutiny can assist in shaping policy changes to make environmental improvements.</p>
<p>Performance management:</p> <p>Service improvements facilitated through performance review will support better service delivery evidenced both in customer satisfaction and improvements to performance indicators, some of which are included in the beacon index.</p>
<p>Consultation:</p> <p>The working group was established by the panel at its meeting on 2 August 2004 and is comprised of councillors Martin, Rochelle, Sarohi and Mrs. D.A. Shires. This report was agreed with the chairman and members of the benefits service working group.</p>
<p>Contact officers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elizabeth Kennedy - head of exchequer • John Scotney - interim head of housing benefits • Viv Farrell - principal benefits manager • Frazer Powell - constitutional services officer <p>Tel: 01922-652015 powellf@walsall.gov.uk</p>

1. KEY POINTS FROM MEETING

- 1.1 Councillor Rochelle was appointed chairman of the benefits service working group for the municipal year 2004/05. The working group noted that its remit was:-
- To consider the benefit claim form, its layout and the information it requires with a view to recommending an improved form;
 - To optimise customer access to the benefits service so that the public receive advice in as prompt and appropriate manner as possible

- To make recommendations to ensure that customer waiting times are within acceptable limits
- To consider the reference from the childrens service and lifelong learning scrutiny and performance panel so as to increase the number of people registered for free school meals and the possible introduction of a single claim form for housing benefit and free school meals

1.2 Reference from childrens service and lifelong learning scrutiny and performance panel – 21 July 2004

The working group considered the reference from the above scrutiny panel relating to the take up of free school meals:-

That Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel be requested to consider the issue of the uptake of free school meals in Walsall, including proposals to increase the number of people registering for free school meals in Walsall and the possible introduction of a single registration form for housing benefit and free school meals eligibility.

Having considered the reference and a report on the take up of free school meals (marked as Appendix 1) the following decisions were made:-

Decision

1. That the working group monitor the progress of the targeted take up campaign on free school meals;
2. That, as part of the targeted campaign on the take up of free school meals, the reminder letter to potential claimants includes a translated explanation (in the same languages as used for the existing council tax and housing benefit claim form) of the purpose of the letter and the importance of registering and claiming for free school meals. The reminder letter to include a question to people asking why they do not take up a free school meal;
3. That officers be requested to use all available information, including the practices set out in the recipe for change booklet, published by the child poverty action group, to inform improvements to provision so as to increase the registration and take up of free school meals,
4. That, to encourage take up, legal services be requested to advise whether the Data Protection Act allows schools to approach directly potential free school meal claimants;

5. That the council's communications unit be requested to advise on the wording of an appropriate press release to encourage the take up of free school meals;
- 6.. That officers be requested to explore the possibility of involving local neighbourhood partnerships in the campaign to increase the take up of free school meals.

1.3 Housing benefit and council; tax benefit claim forms

Decision

The working group noted and supported the introduction in October 2004, of the Department of Work and Pensions Model Claim form for housing and council tax benefit and requested that questions and information about free school meals be incorporated into this form.

1.4 The verification framework home visits arrangements

Having considered the report on the verification framework home visit arrangements (marked Appendix 2), the following decisions were made:-

Decision

That the working group note the existing information and request a further report on progress relating to:-

- (a) The implementation of the verification framework review module by the end of September 2004;
- (b) The implementation of the new claims module and the model claim form by the end of October 2004;
- (c) The on-going performance on the visits module following its introduction.

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Free School Meals

Currently we have an application form for housing and council tax benefit and a form to apply for free school meals (FSM). When we adopt the DWP model form (October 2004) we will add the information and questions for FSMs so that customers only need to complete one claim form to apply for all three benefits.

Who can qualify for FSMs ?

- families with children who are in full time non advanced education and who go to a school in the borough
- who receive either Income Support, Income based Job seekers Allowance, Child Tax Credit
- Asylum Seekers

FSMs Take Up in Walsall

During the period 1st April 2004 to 30th June 2004 we had an average of 3,895 families (7,511 children) claiming FSMs. However, an interrogation of the housing benefit system of HB claims which also fit the FSMs conditions suggested that there are potentially 2,300 families who are eligible to claim FSMs but do not actually take up a claim. Not only are they missing out on a free school meal but Government funding for schools is related to the numbers of children registered for FSMs so Walsall is losing out on funding.

To tackle this we have written to all of these families to encourage them to claim or, even if they do not want to take up the meals, to register so that their child's school receives its potential funding. At 6th September 2004 we have had 674 forms back. Of these, 218 are new claims, the remainder are claims who had not previously returned a review form or who have claimed as part of the new school year rather than in response to the take up form. We will be following this up with a reminder letter, phone call and are considering the cost effectiveness of home visits. We will also attend school open days to promote FSMs to parents.

A recent study by the Child Poverty Action Group (Recipe for Change. A good practice guide to school meals) suggests however, that there are many reasons why take up of FSMs is low. These include:

Stigma

Poor quality of food/food does not cater for cultural requirements

Lack of awareness

The school meal is the main meal of the day for many children. Recipe for Change includes some ideas for good practices:

- breakfast clubs

- fruit tuck
- healthy eating workshops – families and school
- healthier food/improved menus
- rebranding of FSMs to children
- improved system in canteen to abolish FSMs “ticket”

Options

1. That Members monitor the progress of the targeted take up campaign
2. That Members carry out a survey amongst their constituents who qualify for FSMs to identify:
 - a. How many are not claiming FSMs
 - b. Why they do not take up the meal
3. Use this information to develop improvements to FSMs to increase registration and take up; incorporating as appropriate, good practises from Recipe for Change.

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The Verification Framework Home Visits Arrangements

Introduction

The Department for Work and Pensions' Verification Framework (VF) sets the minimum standard for local authorities in relation to:

- the information that must be collected and verified before housing and council tax benefit can be paid
- the evidence and checks which must be made during the life of a claim
- the arrangements for reviewing claims on the basis of "risk". High risk claims are those where applicant's circumstances have the potential to change frequently, such as self employed people. DWP notify local authorities of these claims. The claims can be checked by several methods but specific types and numbers must be visited under VF to check the applicant is correctly eligible. The VF system of reviewing claims replaces the system under which local authorities sent out review forms at least once per year.

VF Home Visiting Arrangements at Beacon Councils

Blackpool and Salford Councils are both VF compliant and both have Beacon status for their benefit service.

Key good practice points from their VF Home Visits Procedures are detailed below:

- Preparation of visit file and checklist completion before the visit
- Economical arrangement of visiting routes
- Training on interview good practises and home visits
- Training by the Police or external specialist trainers on personal safety
- Training on VF standards and visits form completion
- Record of planned visits, route and times held at base office
- Availability of mobile phones and hourly phone contact with base
- Accompanied visits in appropriate cases
- Availability of personal attack alarms
- Risk assessments
- Speedy follow up actions including feedback to customer and completion of VF records

Position at Walsall Benefits Service

The VF can be implemented in modules; the review module, new claims module and visits module.

Review Module

We are currently implementing the review module which involves reviewing a specified number of claims identified by DWP by means of a review form, a visit (which counts towards the target numbers in the visits module), or in some cases a telephone call.

New Claims

The new claim module should be in place by the end of October 2004. This involves checking and verifying information supplied in support of new claims to the standards set by the VF. The claim form must also meet specific criteria and authorities are strongly encouraged to adopt the DWP/Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's model claim form. We will be adopting this form (amended to include Free School Meals, and incorporating good practice points from other examples) in October 2004.

Visits Module

The visits module requires local authorities to carry out a minimum number of visits per year equivalent to 20% of its case load. This is slightly less than the number of visits required by VF overall. Visits carried out as part of the review module also count towards the total target. Currently our caseload is 26,500 so we would be required to carry out 5300 visits per year. The proposed new structure includes provision for a VF visits team and the implementation of this module will therefore take place following the restructure.

We will be adopting the visits procedures set by the VF and aim to incorporate the good practises used by the Beacon status councils, the corporate Health and Safety guidelines and other safety good practice guides such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust.

Funding

Local authorities receive funding from DWP to implement the VF. It does not matter, in relation to funding, which module is implemented first. We will receive Set up Funding of £197,704 and a total for ongoing funding of £398,395.

Options

1. That Members monitor progress on:
 - a. The implementation of the VF Review module by the end of September 2004
 - b. The implementation of the New Claims module and the model claim form by the end of October 2004.
 - c. The ongoing performance on the visits module following its introduction.