West Lothian Council

Revenues Unit
Benefit Take Up Strategy
2009 / 10

Working for West Lothian Council - mission statement, values and guiding principles

Our **mission statement** is:

"striving for excellence… working with and for our communities"

… and the following **values** demonstrate the practices West Lothian Council employees should adopt.

values - we are striving for excellence in:

- **focusing on our customers` needs**
- **being honest, open and accountable**
- **providing equality of opportunities**
- **developing employees**
- **making best use of our resources**
- **working in partnership**

The mission statement and values were devised and published in 1996 when West Lothian Council was formed

In addition a set of **guiding principles** was developed during the organisational review in 2001/2002 to help us focus on the delivery and development of services….

- **a corporate council… focused on our priorities**
- **a connected council… at the heart of a network of partners**
- **a customer focused council… organised around the needs of the citizen**
- **an adaptive council… operating in a responsive positive culture**
- **a best value council… delivering high quality integrated services**
- **an e-council… enabled by technology**

Aims of our Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit take up strategy

The aim of the take up strategy is to embrace the principles of the council's mission statement, values, guiding principles and benefits vision by ensuring that the council adopts a proactive approach to encourage all our customers, who may have entitlement to Housing Benefit and/ or Council Tax Benefit to claim those benefits. The Revenues Unit will share this strategy with our internal colleagues in services such as the Advice Shop, Housing and Customer Services and Social Policy. We will also work in tandem with external partners to deliver our aims. Given the current position of the economy and the fact that the situation may be with us for years to come, it is more important than ever that our customers receive all the state benefits and financial help available to them and as well from helping people claim Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit, we aim to identify any additional financial help that our customers might be entitled to and steer them towards this using our internal and external partners.

The Benefits of the Strategy

As well as maximising the customer's income, other positive outcomes for our customers and our communities will be:

- Increases in disposable income will also lead to more household financial stability and reduce the possibility of people falling behind with their rent, Council Tax and utility bills. This not only has a beneficial effect on the efficiency of the Councils collection procedures but also helps guard against the possibility of homelessness and fuel supply disconnection.
- Increases in income could also enable people to have a healthier diet and be able to better heat their homes. This will have a beneficial knock on effect for local health service providers.
- A large part of the additional income generated by benefit gains will be spent in the local economy there will also be advantages for local businesses.

The Barriers

The Strategy is based upon firstly understanding the reasons why people who are entitled to benefits fail to make a claim, either through choice or lack of awareness, and then encouraging them to take up their entitlement. There have been a number of studies undertaken to assess the reasons why people are reluctant to claim. These studies have identified a number of "barriers" which must be successfully countered in order to improve take-up rates. The importance of understanding these barriers cannot be underestimated. It is with these barriers in mind that the Revenues Unit has developed the majority of its publicity and take-up work.

Analysis carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions has shown that the most common reason why people failed to claim their Pensions Credit entitlement is quite simply that they don't think they will qualify. A considerable number of people who failed to claim their Pension Credit entitlement also thought that home ownership or receiving financial support from their family also prevented them from being eligible. Other factors often cited as reasons for low take up include:

- Lack of awareness of benefits
- The stigma of claiming
- Bad experiences when making a previous claim or other dealings with the organization
- Lack of certainty about entitlement
- Complicated and onerous claims processes
- Lack of personal contact in campaigns / claims procedures
- Lack of co-ordination of take up work
- Lack of support in the claims process especially where there are equal access considerations either in terms of the customer having

- a first language other than English,
- mobility difficulties,
- sensory impairment, or
- learning difficulties.

Key elements of the Strategy

The strategy will be contain several key elements:
- Improving equality of access to benefits
- Partnership working
- Targeted campaigns for client groups
- Simplifying the claims process
- Quality advice, information and publicity

Equal Access

Access to the benefits service should be of equal quality for all customers, regardless of factors such as disability, ethnicity and language requirements.

The Revenues Unit will:

- Where a need arises, utilize the services provided by the Big Word and K International to assist customers, who do not have English as their first language.
- Visiting Officers will be equipped with portable induction loop equipment.
- Where a customer requests, provide and receive correspondence in Braille, audio tape and large print.
- Provide an on-line benefits calculator on the West Lothian Council web site.
- Provide facilities for receiving and responding to text messages.
- Introduce and develop an on-line benefits claim form that will be easy to use and provide telephone assistance for people who need help filling it in.

Partnership Working

Forming and developing effective partnership arrangements both with other council services and central government bodies such as the Pensions Service, Inland Revenue and Jobcentre Plus can only achieve success and efficiency in promoting the take up of benefits.

Partnership working will be undertaken as follows:

Internal partners

- The Customer Liaison Officer (CLO) will act as a central contact point for staff from the council's Advice Shop and McMillan Advice Team. He will work with them to resolve issues relating to Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit, thus ensuring that those benefits are granted wherever possible.
- The CLO will sit on Rent arrears panels and will ensure that the take up of benefits is maximised in these cases.
- The Revenues Unit will deliver training to staff in the Advice Shop and Housing and Customer Services in order to empower staff within these services to collect and verify information and documentation in support of benefit claims.

- Benefit take-up will form part of the Communities and Information Service Plan, the Finance Service Plan and the Housing and Customer Services, “Customer Service Commitments.”

External partners

- An officer from the Revenues Unit will be seconded to a joint working project with the Pensions Service.
- The CLO will act as a central contact point for the Livingston Citizens Advice Bureau and other welfare advice contacts.
- The CLO will provide benefit advice for the lone parent advisors at local Jobcentre Plus offices.
- Decision-makers with designated responsibility for dealing with claims from Almond and Weslo tenants will work directly from the offices of these organizations.

Targeted campaigns for client groups

Campaigns will be targeted at the needs of individual client groups, who are identified as “underclaiming”.

Specific initiatives include:

- Annual Council Tax Benefit campaign accompanying Council Tax bills.
- The secondment of a Section Leader to the Pension Service to jointly work to encourage Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit take up utilising information held by The Pension Service that shows people getting Pension Credit but not HB/CTB. This will also include Pension Credit take-up utilizing information held by the Revenues Unit, which shows people getting HB/CTB but not Pension Credit.
- Working with staff from the Advice Shop and the McMillan Advice Team to ensure that client’s who have debt problems are receiving appropriate awards of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit.

Provision of quality advice / information / publicity

The Revenues Unit will publicise and promote the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit schemes by:

- Designing and providing a range of leaflets for customers, which will give information about claiming Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Extended payments.
- Introducing and developing an on-line facility to allow customers to make claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
- The provision of leaflets on entitlement to other welfare benefits
- Posters promoting the availability of benefits will be provided for display in public buildings.
- Development of information promoting the take up of benefit on the West Lothian Council web site with appropriate links to other sites. This will include details of who may claim, how to claim and the proof and evidence that will be required.
- Use of appropriate press and media advertisements to raise the profile of campaigns.
- Provide Tellytalk – a video conferencing and document scanning facility at strategically selected CIS offices.
- Locating experienced Benefits officers in the Bathgate CIS office, Whitburn CIS office and the Strathbrock partnership in Broxburn.
- The provision of a home visiting service for customers who cannot access a council office.

YOU CAN CONTACT US ABOUT HOUSING BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT

Contact Benefits staff at the Customer Service Centre by:

Telephone – 01506 776800

Contact the Revenues Unit by:

Text – 07624802248

Fax – 01506 776898

E -mail – Benefits@westlothian.gov.uk

Textphone – 01506 776827

Please note that the Revenues Unit also provide a home visiting service for customers who are unable to access any of the West Lothian Council Office listed. Enquiries regarding this can be made on 01506 776800.

Contact the Advice Shop by:

Telephone – 01506 776444

Fax – 01506 776448

E -mail – *advice.shop@westlothian.gov.uk*

Or in person at:

West Lothian Council Advice Shop Unit 9-12 Waverly Street Industrial Estate Bathgate EH48 4HY	*Office opening hours:* Monday – 9.00 am to 17.00 pm Tuesday – 9.00 am to 17.00 pm Wednesday – 9.00 am to 1.00 pm Thursday – 9.00 am to 17.00 pm Friday – 9.00 am to 16.00 pm

Contact your local area office, in person, at:

COUNCIL INFORMATION SERVICE OFFICES	
Linlithgow County Buildings	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues, Wed & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm Closed for lunch – 12.30 pm to 1.30 pm
West Calder 24 – 26 Main Street	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 10.30 am to 5.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm Closed for lunch – 1.00 pm to 2.00 pm
*Broxburn Strathbrock Partnership Centre	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues, Wed & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm,
*Whitburn 5 East Main Street	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm , Wed 8.30 am to 3.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm
*Bathgate Lindsay House, South Bridge Street	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 8.30 am to 3.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm
*Fauldhouse 10 Main Street	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 8.30 am to 3.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm. Closed for lunch – 12.30 pm to 1.30 pm
*Livingston Noth The Ability Centre, Carmondean	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 8.30 am to 3.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm Closed for lunch – 1.00 pm to 2.00 pm
*Blackburn Connected The Mill Centre	Opening Hours: Mon & Fri 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. n Tues & Thurs 9.00 am to 7.00 pm, Wed 9.00 am to 3.00 pm, Sat 9.30 am to 12.30 pm Closed for lunch – 12.30 pm to 1.30 pm
*Armadale 1/3 East Main Street	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues & Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 8.30 am to 3.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm
West Lothian Connected Almondvale Centre, Livingston	Opening Hours: Mon, Tues, Thurs 8.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wed 10.00 am to 5.00 pm, Fri 8.30 am to 4.00 pm, Sat 9.30 am to 2.30 pm

* These offices have Benefits staff from the Revenues Unit on-site.

* These offices have Tellytalk facilities on-site.