



Dover District Council and Thanet District Council

**Joint Strategy
for delivering the Benefits Policy**

March 2010

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Strategy for delivering the Benefits Policy

What is this strategy for?

Dover District Council and Thanet District Council have adopted this joint strategy to deliver the Benefit Policy, because we are committed to providing a local and accessible Benefits Service that ensures the needs of our community are at the heart of the design and delivery of the service, now, and in the future.

This supports the East Kent Local Strategic Partnership strategy and Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. We both have the same aims and are working towards having the same service delivery methods, which will concentrate our

‘...resources to best advance the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the people of East Kent.’

The complex nature of the modern welfare benefit system means that the potential beneficiaries of such schemes are too often not aware of their entitlement, or are put off claiming due to how complicated the application process is.

There is a long list of issues which create unnecessary barriers and hurdles to people taking up their full entitlement including:

- apathy
- bureaucracy
- confusion and hearsay
- English not being a potential customer's first language
- ignorance
- lack of joint working between agencies to maximise entitlement
- lack of promotion and publicity
- lack of support
- learning difficulties
- mental health problems
- official errors and delays in claim processing
- physical disabilities
- pride
- stigma
- substance abuse

This strategy details how we will deliver our five 'Benefits Policy' aims to help Dover and Thanet District Councils

- tackle these issues

- minimise the barriers, and
- maximise take up of all welfare benefits available to our residents.

(there will be a link to the 'Benefits Policy' if this Strategy is viewed online)

Various other policies and strategies are referred to in this document. If you are reading this in paper format and would like to see any of these, please contact benefits@thanet.gov.uk on 01843 577552.

Aim 1 The RIGHT Benefit

- New staff members complete a training programme that ensures all aspects of benefits and customer care are thoroughly covered. A mixture of intensive one-to-one training, mentoring, teaming-up with an experienced staff member, and team work are all part of the training programme and ongoing development. 100% of the work they do is checked to begin with, gradually reducing as they become more competent and confident. They have to prove they are fully competent before the level of checking is reduced to the experienced officers' general checking level.
- We carry out a minimum 10% general check of officers' work to make sure our customers can be confident their benefit is correct.
- All staff members have an annual Personal Performance Review, where they set their objectives for the coming year and identify their personal development needs and training. At least two additional formal in-year reviews take place (more if appropriate), one of which will record a summary of personal performance for the preceding year.
- Individual and team training needs are collated by the Training Officers and training plans are devised for the whole Division.
- Regular refresher training, and training on changes in the law, form an integral part of our staffs ongoing development, to ensure our customers continue to receive the right benefit, advice and assistance appropriate to their circumstances.
- All staff members are encouraged to develop their skills, so contributing to the continuous improvement of the service we provide.
- Staff members are encouraged to study for qualifications relevant to their role, for example, the IRRV Technician, full member or NVQ level.
- We provide training to partner organisations and agencies on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit related issues, as appropriate.

- Our partner organisations and agencies provide us with training on their benefits and changes in law, as appropriate.
- We train and provide support to Registered Social Landlords that have signed up to our verification scheme, so they can assist their customers in applying for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, and provide all the evidence to support their claim.
- All staff members are given guidance in effective communication, using plain English – not jargon, when writing letters, and when talking to our customers.
- Senior staff members lead and encourage others to always be customer focused.
- We will always ensure the maximum possible benefit is paid, as the law allows.
- All letters telling our customers about their benefit entitlement encourage them to tell us about any changes in their circumstances, and give examples of the types of changes we may need to know about.
- Whenever a customer contacts us, our officers are encouraged to remind them that they must tell us about changes in their circumstances.
- Dover District Council takes a lead in the National Leaflet Campaign. Thanet District Council uses this facility, and it is available to all local authorities. It provides leaflets on a range of benefit issues, including possible entitlement, and what customers need to tell us. We use these across our district to promote the benefit service. They are available in a number of languages, Braille and large print.



- We will use targeted campaigns of leaflets, flyers and posters to remind customers that they must tell us about their changes of circumstances.
- Where we know there will be a future change to a customer's circumstances, we use a variety of methods that best suits our customer, to remind them we need evidence of that change, for example an annual wage or private pension increase.
- We encourage customers to claim backdated benefit if they have a good reason for not claiming earlier.
- We publicise and promote the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) Scheme, to encourage customers to claim this top-up if their benefit does not meet their full rent or Council Tax charge. Our DHP policy sets out who can be awarded this extra payment.
- We will maximise take-up of all Council Tax discounts and exemptions.

Aim 2 Pay Benefit QUICKLY

- We constantly review our working methods and procedures, and share and seek out best practice with other authorities. This helps us; provide the best customer service possible, reduce the time it takes to pay benefit and to give our customers a value-for-money service.
- We will also meet with representatives from other Council departments and our neighbouring authorities at least four times a year, to challenge the service we all deliver.
- Our Service Plan states the average number of days we aim to take to process a new claim or change of circumstances. We consult with our community and stakeholders and use their feedback to help us decide what these targets should be each year. These are published on our website. ***There will be a link to our service plan if this strategy is viewed online***
- We have a simple procedure in place that ensures cases that have a priority need are dealt with urgently. These are known as 'fast track' claims.
- We ask for all necessary information and supporting evidence as soon as possible. Our decisions are made by taking all the information and evidence provided into account.

- We will use any cost effective tools possible that make claiming easier for our customers, or quicker for our officers to process their claims, for example, electronic claim forms, and document image processing. These tools help our customers and us to complete claim forms quickly, save time in processing the information, see full case details quickly, and allow us to monitor and manage our workloads effectively.
- We will always try to ensure our customers only have to contact us once to claim or tell us about a change in circumstances. We will look at cases where we have had to contact the customer, or the customer has had to contact us more than once, to see what the reason for this was. We will consult with these customers, where relevant, to help us further break down the barriers that hinder us providing an efficient service.
- We will offer our customers a range of ways that they can claim, so that everyone who needs to claim can choose the way that best suits their needs:
 - assisted claims – either face to face or over the phone
 - self-service – using the internet
 - home visits – for vulnerable customers who cannot access our service in any other way.
- We will process a customer's claim within 7 days of them first contacting us, if they make an appointment to see a Benefits Officer and they have supplied all the evidence we need to make a decision on their claim.

Aim 3 What our residents are ENTITLED to

Identifying potential customer groups for campaigns and promotions

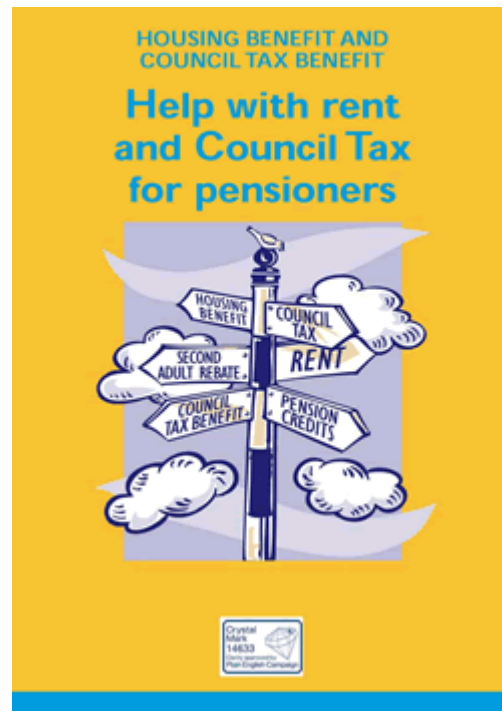
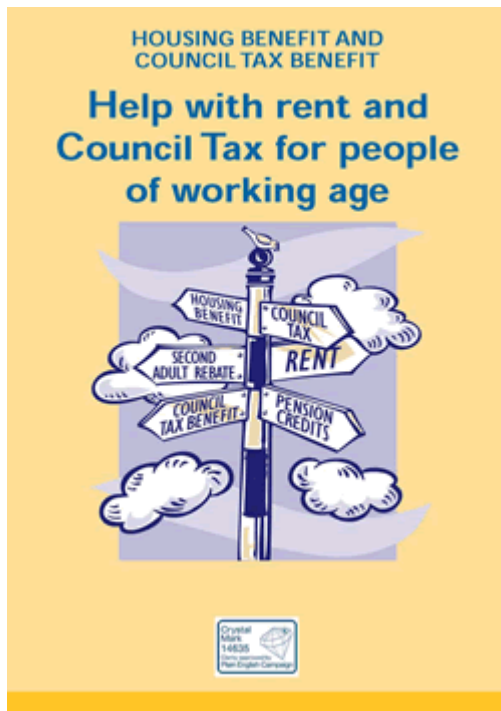
By using:

- local and national statistics
- Mosaic
- census data
- poverty indices
- data matching with existing records held by the Council (within the boundaries of Data Protection policies)
- joint working with other agencies and organisations
- co-operative working with other organisations

We will identify areas or customer groups where priority take up activities will be carried out to ensure the most economic benefit will be achieved.

Examples of:

- target customer groups
- agencies and organisations with whom we will match data and/or jointly work
- potential mailshots that will be carried out without using specific data matching, but with co-operative working are detailed in **Appendix A**.
- Take up will be by targeted campaigns, events, literature displays and mailshots at specific venues and areas. Priority will be given to groups where the risk of not claiming is high. See **Appendix A**
- A planned programme of take-up campaigns, publicity and promotion will be established. This will be reviewed at least once a year to provide both effective marketing and cost effectiveness, to ensure our aims are achieved.
- Annual Council Tax bills will include information and advice on the Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Second Adult Rebate schemes, including helpline numbers and basic advice on eligibility.
- Campaign marketing will be done in a way which will appeal most to the target customer group or area, to maximise take-up.
- We will continue to seek out innovative take up methods and research the effectiveness of alternative marketing strategies to maintain interest in our campaign messages. This will include evaluation of previous campaign methods and liaison with other local authorities, partner agencies and customer groups to ensure successful campaigns and the most suitable approach for each group.
- A nominated officer will oversee the planning of any take up campaign, publicity or promotional event to ensure it is carried out effectively and within the guidelines set out within this strategy.
- We will aim to identify the reasons why some of our community members fail to take up or renew their benefit. Where entitlement appears to exist but has not been taken up, we will make efforts to ensure sufficient support has been given and that potential customers are fully aware of their options.
- We will monitor claims that fail due to the lack of supporting evidence or information, to try to identify and reduce local barriers that prevent or hinder customers from claiming, and identify service improvements.
- All applications and literature will be written in plain English and where appropriate the Plain English Crystal Mark will be sought.



“Examples of leaflets”

- Information provided by the service will always be clear, accurate, up-to-date and easy to understand.
- Lists of available information and ‘help’ leaflets will be publicised and made available to all customers, stakeholders and partner organisations.
- The existence and availability of the following range of services will be pro-actively publicised:
 - appointment service
 - area office and Gateway opening times
 - customer helpline service
 - email address
 - fax number
 - home visiting service
 - language line service
 - National Leaflet Campaign
 - partner services
 - private interview room
 - signers
 - website
- Customers, stakeholders and partner organisations will be consulted on a regular basis (to be determined by the needs of each group) to ensure the service:
 - remains accessible to all

- is responsive to the varied needs of its customers
 - maintains a high-quality standard
- Internal systems and procedures will be continuously reviewed, to allow applications to be made and processed in a manner that actively supports customers through the claim process.
- Customers will be encouraged to provide feedback on the quality of service. All complaints and feedback comments will be documented, responded to within 10 working days and where appropriate, changes of policy and procedures will be made.
- We will liaise on a regular basis with our Customer Services Teams, to ensure a consistent approach is maintained and that customer service standards remain high.
- Customers and potential customers can access an online calculator via our website, to work out what Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit they may be entitled to and to consider the effect that changes of circumstances may have on their entitlement.
- Our service supports and promotes the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy.
- We will be mindful of any cultural issues that may affect the ability of a customer to make a claim, and we will support in the most appropriate manner those customers who want to access our service.

Aim 4 Maximise income and improve quality of life

- Appropriate training will be given to staff about existing and new laws, so that they can identify the entitlement to other benefits and other reductions that are available, so promoting income maximisation during the course of any application or customer contact.
- Benefits notifications will tell customers about other means tested benefits and other local authority grants, discounts and reductions, where potential entitlement is identified.
- We will evaluate any change of law, which could potentially increase or establish entitlement to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, to see if a specific monitored take up campaign should be carried out.



“An example of a poster campaign and how we work with our partners”

- We will review and amend leaflets, posters, application forms, internal guidance and our website pages, where necessary, following any changes in law or internal procedures. We will keep an internal record of these reviews.
- We will set annually a programme of monitored take up campaigns, publicity and promotions for the next 12 months, taking into account changes in caseloads, community make up and local issues.
- We will actively seek out and respond to additional opportunities that arise to promote take up.
- We will promote the appeal rights of customers following a decision made relating to benefit entitlement, on all relevant notifications and leaflets.
- Following a change in circumstances which leaves entitlement to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit in question, we will encourage the customer to submit details based on their new circumstances, so that ongoing entitlement and reduction of any overpayment caused by the change can be worked out.
- We will contact customers as soon as possible if a claim may be delayed because we don't have all the information or supporting evidence we need to make a decision. Where a contact telephone number is available, we will use this as our first method of contact.

Where a letter is necessary, it will contain our customer helpline number.

- Our service will support and work in accordance with our Council's Financial Inclusion Strategy.

Aim 5 Listen

- We have established links and maintain liaison with partner services, agencies and organisations, to promote income maximisation within our District. Service Level Agreements have been created, where relevant, and are reviewed as detailed in the individual Agreements, including the potential for joint surgeries, home visits and cross-referrals of customers. A list of current Service Level Agreements can be found in **Appendix B**.
- We will tell partner agencies and interested parties about planned programmes of take up campaigns, so that they have the opportunity of working jointly with us. This will maximise coverage and be cost effective for all. We will also seek to take part in any relevant take up campaigns being led by our partner agencies and organisations.
- Any take up campaign will be conducted, where possible, in partnership and/or following consultation with representatives from the targeted group. This will maximise support and effectiveness for the campaign.
- We will use our Council Consultation Toolkit guidelines when asking our District for its views.
- We will attend landlord forums at least twice a year, to ensure effective two-way communication exists.
- Any relevant changes in internal policy or procedures that affect stakeholder groups, partner services, agencies and organisations will be communicated to them and any feedback will be reviewed.
- Local regeneration projects will be used as a springboard for take up campaigns. Joint working with specific project leaders will be sought to maximise the effectiveness and increase support of these campaigns.

You said

A customer survey identified that some customers thought our notifications were difficult to understand.

We did

We have worked hard this year to develop a new style of notification letter that is shorter, easier to understand and signposts the award of benefit better.

Appendix A

Examples of target customer groups:

Carers	Ethnic minority communities
Ex-offenders (via the Probation Service)	Faith communities
Gay/lesbian couples	Housebound or infirm people
Households with only one parent (lone parents)	Low income households
Low wage earners	Older people
People living in deprived areas of our District	People with learning difficulties
People with mental health problems	People with physical disabilities
People whose first language isn't English	Potential Second Adult Rebate customers
Recently unemployed people, or people soon to be made redundant	Victims of domestic violence

Examples of agencies, organisations and departments with whom we may data match records:

Council Tax	Department for Work and Pensions
Employer payroll	HM Revenues & Customs (previously Inland Revenue)
Housing association lists	Housing Benefits
The Pension Service	

Examples of mailshots that may be carried out without specific data matching but with co-operative working:

Bus passes	Community newsletters
Council Tax mailings	Disabled parking badge holders
Employer pay slips	Health or social club members
Mailing and marketing agencies	Other council departments
School newsletters	

These lists are only examples of possible data matches and mailshots that will be used as an aid to campaign planning.

Appendix B

List of liaison group meetings held where no Service Level Agreement is required:

Organisation/service	Frequency of meetings
Step Ahead	every 2 months
In Touch	every 2 months
Social Services	every 2 months
Adult Placement Scheme	every 2 months
Porchlight	every 2 months
Independent Living Scheme	every 2 months
Sure Start	every 2 months
Volunteer Bureau	every 2 months
Rethink	every 2 months
Millmead Children's Centre	every 2 months
Citizens Advice Bureau	every 2 months
Kenward Trust	every 2 months
KCA	every 2 months
St Pauls Community Trust	every 2 months
Age Concern	every 2 months
Physical and sensory Disability Forum	every 2 months
Kent Housing Benefit Working Group (all Kent local authorities)	every 2 months
Landlords Forum	twice a year

List of liaison group meetings held where a Service Level Agreement is in place:

Organisation/service	Frequency of meetings
Department for Work and Pensions (Joint Board)	twice a year
Department for Work and Pensions (Operational)	quarterly
The Pension Service (Joint Board)	twice a year
The Pension Service (Operational)	quarterly
The Rent Service	twice a year
Registered Social Landlords (who verify claims for us)	monthly (reviewed according to need)
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	Two monthly (plus the CAB older person advisor verifies and accepts evidence for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims)