

Benefits Service Equality Impact Assessment

Introduction

This report briefly summarises how the Equality Impact Assessment on the Benefits Service was undertaken, its scope and the key findings.

The assessment was undertaken by 2 officers from the Benefits Service, a 'critical friend' from Customer Services and facilitated by the council's Equality & Inclusion Consultant, Ian Barrett.

The assessment took place between July and September 2009. The assessment required two 2 hour meetings and time for members of the team to check or research points that arose.

Impact Assessment

At the initial scoping meeting we discussed the Benefits Service and how customers find out about us (e.g. website, other agencies, word of mouth). All aspects of the Benefits Service were examined including how to claim, how to notify changes and how to appeal.

The group systematically assessed the Benefits Service against each customer issue and group listed on the scoping and screening template and considered what impact there is.

Early on in the process it was established that no Benefits Officers have their own individual caseload or are assigned cases on the basis of type of claimant or location as they work on cases in date order. It would therefore be difficult for an officer to discriminate when processing claims. Accuracy checks are also undertaken by Team Leaders and results recorded and monitored via a spreadsheet. The ethnic group of the customer, where known, is recorded on this spreadsheet. Additional monitoring is undertaken for certain areas, including claims where an investigation has been undertaken or an appeal has been received. Current monitoring will be discussed with John Kelly, Research & Consultation Officer, and any improvements or additional monitoring suggested will be implemented.

The age groups were amended to reflect the Benefits legislation. The age groups considered were as follows:

Under 16
16 to 18
19 to 25
26 to pension age
Pension age
Over 80

The Benefits Service attend all relevant forums in their area to provide advice and assistance. These include the BME Forum, Older Persons Forum and they will attend the Disability Forum when it has been established.

We had a number of sources of information available to us when considering the impact of Benefits Services for each issue/group. These were:

- The Benefits Service Equality Monitoring data. This includes a profile of all benefits claimants and their ethnic group where known. It also includes the monitoring of complaints, accuracy, Discretionary Housing Payments, Backdate awards, Sanctions and Appeals
- Housing & Council Tax Benefits Take Up Strategy
- Housing & Council Tax Benefits Access Strategy
- Revenues Service Plan
- Data from the Customer Satisfaction Survey
- Data from the Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey
- Leaflets and forms available for customers

Findings

The assessment team did not find any evidence to suggest that any of the customer issues/groups are negatively impacted by Benefits Services. Benefits Services are considered to have a positive impact for all relevant customer groups. The service already operates in a way that ensures that groups who might be excluded or disadvantaged are targeted to encourage take-up of benefits. It also provides a variety of ways to access the service and appropriate assistance to individuals who require additional help or support.

The assessment team concluded that no further research or consultation was required, but some improvements could be made. These are listed below. In addition, the assessment identified a few areas where lack of information about a customer made our conclusions less certain.

The attached Benefits Service Improvement Plan therefore lists the actions required to address the areas where the impact on the particular customer group is unknown as well as other general recommendations for improvement that came out of the assessment process and learning points from other EqlAs..

All of the actions will be addressed by the Benefits Section and will be completed in this financial year.

Key Recommendations

- Continue to gather evidence and monitor equality information
- Develop the monitoring system in the light of the corporate guidance on equality monitoring
- Ensure all staff receive Equality training and Mental Health Awareness training
- Continue to attend relevant Forums and improve relationships with customers and stakeholders

Monitoring

The Benefits Service Improvement Plan will be monitored by the Benefits Manager. Action points have a target date for completion.

Conclusions

Detailed Assessment – No detailed assessment is required.

Improvement Plan – 13 actions were identified to address the issues that arose during the assessment. These are summarised in the table below.

If you have any comments on this impact assessment please contact the Benefits Manager, Jane Petty, on 01962 848 460 or via email at jpetty@winchester.gov.uk

Improvement Plan for Benefits Services

Actions required to achieve improvement	Responsibility	Target date	Resource implications
Contact Northgate user group to find out from users of the same benefits system what equality monitoring they use the system for	Jane Petty	30 Sep 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Discuss with Corporate Research Officer the current equality monitoring that is in place. Consider, and where relevant, implement the amendments suggested.	Jane Petty	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Notification letters. Add paragraph explaining that help in understanding content is available in a number of ways (e.g. local office, home visit etc)	Lucy Cobern	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Claim form. Add paragraph on front page explaining that help in completion is available in a number of ways (e.g. telephone claim, home visit etc)	Lucy Cobern	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Contact other Hampshire Local Authorities to find out about any equality monitoring they do that could be of assistance to us. Use equality network where possible.	Jane Petty & Ian Barrett	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Finalise Take Up Strategy – actions in this include improving	Jane Petty	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources

communication with stakeholders (including development of a newsletter)			
Work to Customer Service Excellence standard to provide customer focused service for all customers	Jane Petty	31 Dec 2009	Officer time – existing resources
Make contact with local young carers group to ensure they are aware of Local Authority services and the benefits that are available for the family	Lucy Cobern	31 Mar 2010	Officer time – existing resources
Attend Disability Forum when it has been established	Lisa Chaffey		Officer time – existing resources
Design a large print postcard for those customers who are visually impaired to make them aware of assistance that is available	Lucy Cobern	31 Mar 2010	Officer time – existing resources
Make contact with Winchester Area Action Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Service	Lucy Cobern	31 Mar 2010	Officer time – existing resources
Make contact with local Independent Domestic Violence Advisor	Lucy Cobern	31 Mar 2010	Officer time – existing resources
Organise Equality training and Mental Health Awareness training for more staff in the Benefit Service	Lucy Cobern	31 Mar 2010	Officer time – existing resources