

Benefit Take-up Strategy 2008 - 2011



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Benefits Service “Striving for excellence”

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Mission Statement

Scarborough Borough Council's Benefits Service believes that all people in the Borough should be encouraged to claim the benefits and credits to which they are entitled.

This is expressed in the Benefits Service 'Vision Statement', part of our Customer Charter - Our commitment to you is to ***“Ensure the right benefit is paid first time, every time promptly and accurately to all those entitled, whilst guarding against fraud”*** and - *‘We work to maximise benefit take-up, for all those entitled’*.

Supporting the Council's Corporate Plan

The Benefits Service seeks to support the Council's mission, which is 'to enhance the quality of life for those living in, working in, or visiting the Borough, by providing value for money services, consulting people and putting them first'.

Of the Council's 5 key aims, the Benefits Service helps towards creating healthy and vibrant communities in particular, addressing the social and economic needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods:

- By encouraging people to take-up all benefits to which they are entitled
- By working to ensure the right benefit is paid accurately to all those entitled
- By developing partnership arrangements with other key agencies (Jobcentre Plus, Pension Service, Citizens Advice Bureau, North Yorkshire County Council Adult and Community Services Directorate (Benefits and Assessments Service), other North Yorkshire District Councils and City of York Council, Registered Social Landlords and other Voluntary Agencies) to enable customers to access best available advice and assistance
- By active participation and acceptance of the Council's Social Inclusion strategy, recognising diversity and helping to tackle homelessness

Embracing the Council's values

The Benefits Service embraces and fully supports the Council's values.

Looking after the well-being of the Borough

Good performance of the Benefits Service is of paramount importance both to the Council and more importantly to the residents of the Borough as fast, accurate and secure payment of benefit can make a genuine positive difference in a person's quality of life.

Putting Customers First

The Benefits Service meets with a wide variety of stakeholders and greatly values views on how we can improve. Successful consultation, liaison and listening is key to better customer care. Taking steps to continually improve the service based on customer comments is essential.

Treating people fairly

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit is designed to provide financial support for many of the most vulnerable people in society. The Benefits Service has to ensure we are a caring, responsive and most crucially of all, inclusive organisation.

Valuing colleagues

By encouraging our staff to develop and communicate ideas effectively the Benefits Service has made great strides in improving performance and striving for excellence. This wouldn't be possible without their active participation.

Conducting business with honesty and integrity

As a high profile, front line service, we acknowledge that we must demonstrate openness in all aspects of our work. We accept that we don't always get things 100% right because of the complexity of the benefits system and will endeavour to fully explain our decisions when questioned and address any grievances in a robust, comprehensive manner.

Promoting take-up of Benefits

Scarborough Borough Council recognises that there are many reasons why customers may not claim their entitlement such as not being aware of what to claim, being unable to access the right information or support services to make claims, or feeling uncomfortable in claiming.

Scarborough Borough Council recognises that promoting benefits take-up:

- helps customers maximise their income
- helps relieve poverty for individuals and their families
- reduces rent arrears and council tax arrears
- generates money for the local economy
- contributes towards 'Revenues Support Grant'
- is a major element of council wide anti-poverty strategies
- is also an element of council wide social inclusion strategies

What is involved in take-up?

Benefits take-up includes many strands such as:

- 1 making the customer experience of claiming as easy and positive as possible so that customers are not put off claiming
- 2 running general and targeted publicity campaigns, publicity events and information and advice stalls on benefits which may be general or targeted on specific benefits and/or specific customer groups including 'difficult to reach' and vulnerable groups such as elderly homeowners, those with special needs and minority ethnic citizens
- 3 making increased use of IT and appropriate sharing of information with other agencies
- 4 increasing awareness of the range of benefits to staff and professionals who deal with customers and encouraging a 'benefits take-up' culture throughout the Borough
- 5 providing accessible advice services for customers (allowing a choice of ways to contact a variety of agencies)
- 6 providing easy referrals systems for and to other agencies and sections and regular feedback to encourage further referrals

Examples of initiatives undertaken

a Streamlining the claim process making customers' experiences of claiming as easy and positive as possible so that customers are not put off claiming by:

- Reviewing regular customer satisfaction surveys and complaints and acting upon comments where possible
- Speeding up claim processing time and reviewing the quality of letters issued
- Creating a 'FASTPAY' system to monitor, chase up missing documents and process new claims and changes in circumstances quicker
- Providing a Claim Assistance Programme (CAP) to assist those customers who find form-filling a particular challenge
- Developing the Benefits Service web pages on www.scarborough.gov.uk (Advice and Benefits) providing an online claim calculator to check potential entitlement, an online electronic claim form, information on how to claim, opening hours and how to contact the Benefits Service
- Offering home visits for elderly, infirm and those with special needs
- Enabling key partners to carry out new claim verification working with their own clients on the Council's behalf, including North Yorkshire County Council Adult and Community Services Directorate (Benefits and Assessments Service), Yorkshire Coast Homes, Sanctuary Housing and Home Housing
- Addressing Homelessness - Visiting new Housing Benefit customers designated as homeless in partnership with the Council's Homeless team
- Producing a comprehensive set of guidance leaflets in partnership with other North Yorkshire Districts and City of York Council

Examples of initiatives undertaken

b Running general and targeted publicity campaigns, publicity events and information and advice stalls on benefits which may be general or targeted on specific benefits and/or specific customer groups including 'difficult to reach' groups such as elderly homeowners, black and minority ethnic citizens

- Regular multi-media campaigns including: Feel the Benefit campaign (£253,568 additional benefits realised - administered by Welfare Benefits Unit, York), Extra Money - could you get it? (ongoing CAB partnership - Council Tax Benefit and discounts - spring 2004, 2005, 2006), Take a bite out of your Council Tax (Apple) 2007 (£23,367), Time to claim Council Tax Benefit (Clock) 2008 (£32,489) both in conjunction with North Yorkshire Districts & City of York Council and Welfare Benefits Unit
- Supporting the work of the Welfare Benefits Unit in York, particularly with campaigns in the Scarborough Borough Council area (2001 Scarborough & District take-up project, 2002/3 Sure Start maternity grant - 198 claims in Scarborough, 'Feel the Benefit', 2003/4 'Take the Credit', 'Care Home Fees', 'Child on Board')
- Information stalls at: travel concessions distribution, Scarborough Job fairs (organised by DWP Jobcentre Plus), Eastfield Carnival, Dementia Awareness
- Yorkshire Coast Radio - Council Tax Benefit take-up advertisements
- Advertising take-up in widely circulated publications locally such as the Regional Health Guide and Leisure Guide
- Regular attendance at Macmillan Cancer Care Support Group sessions at Scarborough & Whitby libraries

Examples of initiatives undertaken

c Making increased use of IT and appropriate sharing of information with other agencies

- Using HBMS data on Pension Credit recipients cross-checking possible Council Tax Benefit claimants and inviting those eligible to apply
- Warmfront - working in partnership to promote energy saving grants
- Undertaking a pilot 'mobile working' scheme in 2008 allowing direct new claims input into IT system from remote sites including customers' homes

Examples of initiatives undertaken

d Providing accessible advice services for customers (allowing a choice of ways to contact a variety of agencies)

- Widely publicised phone numbers and dedicated Benefits FREEPHONE open Monday to Friday 8.30am - 5pm
- Customer First contact centres in Scarborough, Whitby, Filey & Eastfield to accept new claim forms, changes of address, income or other personal circumstances, supporting documents (onsite scanning facilities) and deal with initial general enquiries
- Provision of Language Line and hearing loop facilities and signs advertising their availability within Customer First Centres
- Literature is made available in other languages. Large print and Braille translations can also be requested
- Private interview appointments system for Benefits, staffed by experienced Benefit assistants in Scarborough (Monday to Friday inclusive) & Whitby (Monday & Fridays only)
- Home visiting service for customers unable to attend Customer First contact centres in person without difficulty - welfare visits encompass referral to other agencies (e.g. DWP, Age Concern, CAB) - Memorandum of Understanding with Local Pension Service to undertake pensioner visits on joint benefits
- Regular articles in Council publications including Borough News, CAB outreach work - weekly drop-in sessions to Scarborough, Whitby & Filey also Town Hall each Wednesday 10.00am to 3.30pm

Summary

- 1 Scarborough Borough Council understands that different customers may have different needs and may be more able to access some agencies and services than others. Therefore, this is reflected by supporting voluntary sector agencies (financially as well as by way of good communication and liaison) and working in partnership in a complementary manner. In addition this is reflected in having active Service Level Agreements with other statutory sector agencies and working in partnership with statutory agencies on specific take-up issues
- 2 As a provider of Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) services with good links to external agencies, Scarborough Borough Council believes
 - it is uniquely placed to contribute to benefits take-up in partnership with a wide variety of agencies
 - it should also support independent initiatives
 - it respects that a joined up approach to take-up should also allow for different agencies to work on different aims and priorities
- 3 Social exclusion affects a whole range of communities and individuals and impacts in a multitude of ways ranging from health, education and jobs to money, crime and housing. However, certain groups are also particularly sensitive to exclusion and the plethora of problems associated with it
- 4 Scarborough Borough Council has carried out an equalities impact assessment giving consideration to target groups covering race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age and religion/faith. We have identified six specific groups which require particular attention: ethnic minority groups, older people, younger people, travellers, lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people and disabled people. The Borough Council provides a number of services targeted at these groups. The Borough Council needs to ensure the requirements of these groups are considered when developing and planning our policies and services

Summary

- 5 We believe that to ensure the maximum success of take-up work, that monitoring of individual cases, of the sources of enquiries and referrals, and of benefits gained must be done at all times. In addition the success of different campaigns and approaches will be monitored and reported on so as to evaluate what has worked and to help inform future work
- 6 We also recognise that whilst work should be planned and structured in advance (in partnership wherever possible) there is also a role for new initiatives, innovation and risk, which should help identify new, radical and successful approaches to take-up in the future
- 7 There should be regular opportunities to study figures and analyse outcomes and reflect on work done so as to inform the direction of future work. This should be done with all key stakeholders and partners such as Citizens Advice Bureaus, Age Concern, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Registered Social Landlords and other Voluntary Agencies
- 8 The Benefits Service publishes an annual report (Individual Cabinet Member Report) covering all aspects of benefits administration and details advice and take-up work that has been done. This includes reference to the number of referrals or cases, and the extent of 'benefit gains' that are due to the work of the Benefits Service or partner agencies. This is presented to Members, benefits and other staff, and partner agencies and will help inform future plans and discussions as to how best to build upon work already done
- 9 From 2008/9 the Benefits Service will undertake ongoing consultation with customers and other key stakeholders to monitor ethnicity trends, user satisfaction, customer needs and preferences, and overall access to service issues

Equalities assessment (2008)

EQUALITY TARGET GROUP	Details
RACE:	All people from whatever background are encouraged to claim. For those people where English is a second language we offer a translation service at Customer First and have a number of staff being trained to speak Polish. Male or female assistance is available where religious beliefs and/or cultural practices dictate.
GENDER:	Not treated any differently but male/female assistants can be requested. We have sensitive procedures for handling claims from people fleeing domestic violence.
DISABILITY:	SBC complies with DDA regulations for access to services in Scarborough, Filey, Whitby & Eastfield. Induction loops are available and a number of front-line staff are trained in sign language. Home visiting is offered where people have mobility problems or have special educational needs. For partially sighted we offer large print options. Braille documents can also be requested. SBC's website meets AA standards for accessibility.
SEXUAL ORIENTATION:	Following the Civil Partnership Act 2004, Benefit application forms have been redesigned to welcome claims from same sex couples as well as mixed.
AGE:	Nationally the largest under-represented group claiming Council Tax Benefit is the over 60 year olds. Whilst all age groups are catered for additional effort is made to encourage older people. This includes a short claim form, partnership working with the local & national Pension Service, North Yorkshire-wide take-up, North Yorkshire Adult Services (Benefit Assessment Team), Voluntary Agencies liaison and CAB take-up project work. For younger people we work with Foundation Housing, Stonham HA, Sanctuary HA and other Voluntary Agencies to support claims from this age group.
RELIGION / FAITH:	We don't discourage any religious groups and actively work with church organisations to assist asylum seekers and people with debt problems.

EQUALITY TARGET GROUPS

Race	BME Groups (White People including Irish, Asian or Asian British People / Black or Black British People / Chinese People, Other Ethnic Groups), Gypsy / Roma People, mixed heritage people, asylum Seekers & refugees
Gender	Women / Men
Disability	People with physical, sensory or learning disabilities, deaf people who use British sign language, people with mental health issues
Sexual Orientation	Gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, trans people
Age	Older people (60+), younger people (17-25), children
Religion / Faith	People of different faith groups or beliefs including non-believers. The most common faith groups include: Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Sikhs and Hindus, which should be considered individually and collectively when assessing needs and impacts.

Equalities assessment (2008)

Ethnic Group breakdown 2006/7		% change
White British	96.64%	- 1.35%
White Irish	0.57%	- 0.10%
White Other	2.05%	+ 1.83%
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	0.00%	
Mixed White and Black African	0.08%	- 0.37%
Mixed White and Asian	0.00%	
Mixed Other	0.08%	- 0.37%
Chinese	0.00%	- 0.22%
Black/Black British Caribbean	0.00%	
Black/Black British African	0.00%	
Black/Black British Other	0.00%	
Asian Indian	0.00%	
Asian Pakistani	0.00%	
Asian Bangladeshi	0.08%	+ 0.08%
Asian Other	0.08%	+ 0.08%
Other ethnic group	0.41%	+ 0.41%

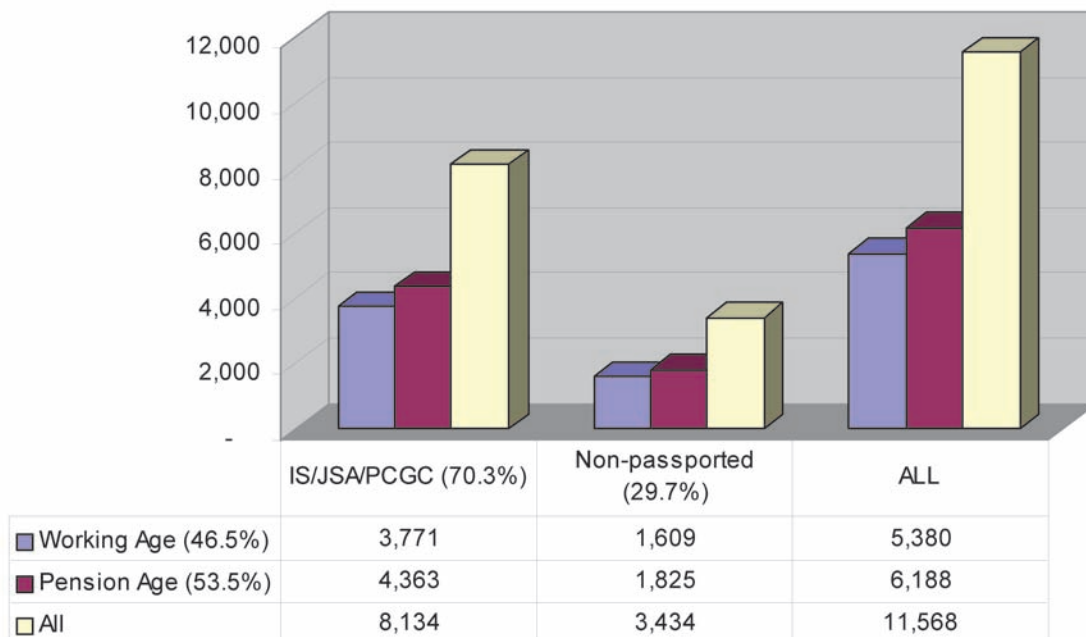
(source: Best Value Benefits Satisfaction Survey BVPI80 2006/7)

Ethnic Group breakdown 2003/4	
White British	97.99%
White Irish	0.67%
White Other	0.22%
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	0.00%
Mixed White & Black African	0.45%
Mixed White & Asian	0.00%
Mixed Other	0.45%
Chinese	0.22%
Black Caribbean	0.00%
Black African	0.00%
Black Other	0.00%
Asian Indian	0.00%
Asian Pakistani	0.00%
Asian Bangladeshi	0.00%
Asian Other	0.00%
Other ethnic group	0.00%

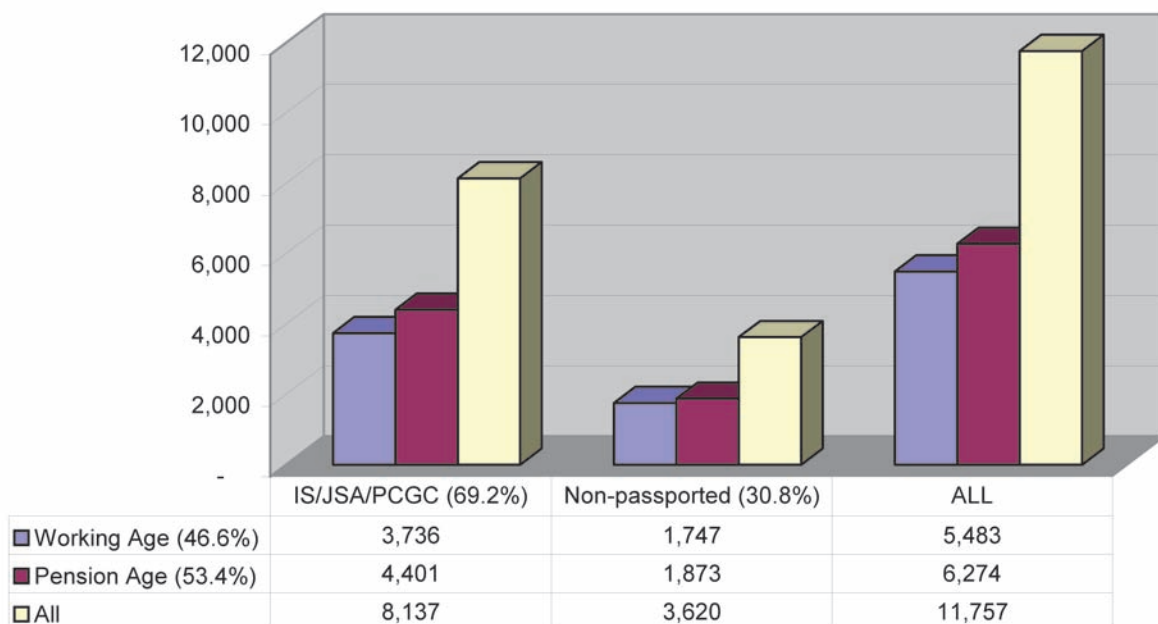
(source: Best Value Benefits Satisfaction Survey BVPI80 2003/4)

Statistics and caseload background

2007/8 Caseload

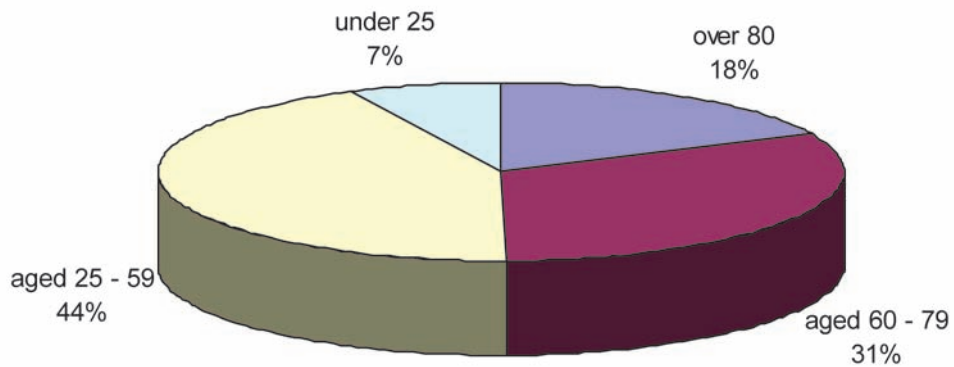


2008/9 Caseload

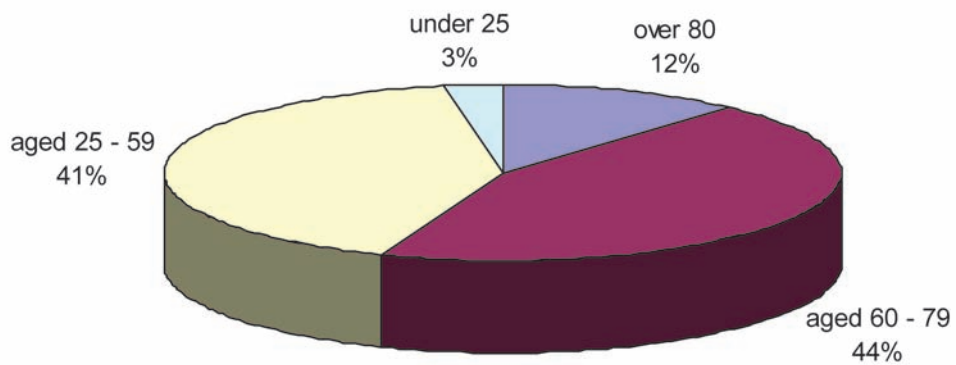


Statistics and caseload background

August 2008 - Female caseload split by age range
6,872 of 11,755 (58.5%)



August 2008 - Male Caseload split by age range
4,883 of 11,755 (41.5%)





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