

CHIEF EXECUTIVE
DATE: 14th APRIL 2014

**ELECTRONIC NOTIFICATION OF CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES FOR HOUSING
BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION AND ELECTRONIC NEW CLAIMS
(Director of Adult Social Care, Health and Housing)**

1. PURPOSE OF DECISION

- 1.1. The introduction of an E-Bens module of the Council's current Benefit Administration System will provide customers the ability to make claims on line. This will represent efficiency for the Council and a more convenient way in which customers can access the service. In addition, the Council has the ability to accept changes in customers' circumstances being notified by phone. This is more convenient for the customer, holds the potential to reduce overpayment of benefit and also avoid Fixed Civil Penalties and reduce work for the Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. Agree to allow electronic notification of changes of circumstances for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and new claims as set out in the order at Appendix A.**

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. The proposal to allow electronic notification of changes in circumstances for benefit claims and on-line claims directly support the Council's following priorities and medium term objectives:
- Priority 4 support older and vulnerable resident;
 - MTO 7 target financial support to vulnerable households;
 - Priority 6 value for money;
 - MTO 11 develop appropriate and cost effective ways for customers to access Council services.

4 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 4.1. The Council's Housing and Benefit Service has been redesigned to deliver a service which helps customers maximise their income and independence. Offering customers a flexible and convenient way in which to inform the Council of changes in their circumstances maximises their ability to receive the benefit they are eligible for and also avoid any potential overpayment of benefit. At the same time it is necessary to ensure that there are suitable measures in place to guard against any fraudulent activity by customers. Reduction in customer demand to the service in terms of paper applications and postage will yield efficiency savings in the region of £8,000 a year.

- 4.2. Increasingly, customers receive electronic copies of wage slips and bank statements and requiring original hard copies of these documents is proving bureaucratic. Once original copies of documents have been received the Council's policy has been amended so that electronic versions of documents will be accepted rather than requiring customers to print off and bring such documents to the council. This reduces cost and inconvenience for the customer but also reduces the work of the Council in taking a hard copy of an electronic document and then scanning that document to add to an application. Electronic versions of documents are only accepted for changes in circumstance once original documents have been seen.
- 4.3. The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (electronic communications) Order 2006 gives local authorities the power to accept, claims, amendments of claims and changes of circumstance notifications electronically or by telephone without the automatic need for written confirmation. Where telephone information is provided by the customer there is a requirement for the information to be verified by relevant documents. The Council will regard proof of delivery of the information that it is recorded on the Council's computer system.
- 4.4. It is recommended that the Council allows customers to inform the council of changes in their circumstances that will effect their Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction award by telephone. For customers making a new claim for housing benefit and/or council tax reduction they should do so on line via the E-bens module of the Northgate Benefit Administration System. Such claims would be verified as papers claims are at present when proof of original documents is received.
- 4.5. It is recommended that customers are advised that they can telephone or email changes of circumstance to the Council but specifically their caseworker. Caseworkers will then action that information in relation to the claim but then diary four weeks for the customer to provide the necessary evidence to substantiate the claim. If the customer fails to provide the evidence by that time the claim will be suspended thus stopping payment until the necessary information is provided. All calls made by customers are recorded and kept for 6 weeks. Claimants will be advised to keep records of their communications. All information received from the customer will be verified by checks on date of birth, national insurance number and other relevant security questions to verify identity. The proposed order will state the presumption that for the purpose of any legal proceedings the identity of the sender of the information electronically is the person whose name is recorded on the Local Authority's computer system.
- 4.6. Customers wishing to make a new claim for Housing or Council Tax Reduction will be able to populate their claim on line. They will then be asked to attend Time Square with the necessary documentation for the application to be processed. Alternatively customers can attend Time Square with the necessary documentation and officers will, populate the application with the customer.
- 4.7. The electronic claiming and notification of changes in circumstance can be made on line or via the telephone. Customers can still complete paper application forms and provide written communication if they do not have easy internet or telephone access.
- 4.8. Procedures have been drafted to guide staff in the operation of electronic notification which include the verification of identity through to how to record contact in the Council's ICT system.
- 4.9. Appeal and revision applications from customers will continue to be made via writing.

4.10. If and when the Direction is made is will be published on the Council's website.

5. ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

5.1 Nothing to add to this report.

Borough Treasurer

5.2 The introduction of electronic notification potentially increases the risk of fraud and the risk of losing housing benefit subsidy. The introduction of robust procedures, together with the retention of a clear audit trail minimises the risk of both.

Equalities Impact Assessment

5.3. Providing customers with the ability to contact the Council electronically concerning their benefit claim will have a positive impact on those who have limited mobility or who face financial hardship in terms of the costs of attending Council offices. It will be necessary to ensure customers who do not have computer access are not disadvantaged by directing them to local libraries where they can access the internet free of charge.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

5.4 There is the potential that fraudulent claims could be made electronically. The verification of claims before they go live will control this and the ability to perpetrate a fraud will be no greater than at present. In addition the control of accepting telephone notification of changes in circumstance can be controlled to a four week period at which time claims will be suspended if required evidence is not forthcoming.

6. CONSULTATION

6.1. Not applicable.

Background Papers

Contact for further information

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Direction

DIRECTION OF BRACKNELL FOREST BOROUGH COUNCIL UNDER THE HOUSING BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT (ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS) (MISCELLANEOUS BENEFITS) ORDER 2006

Bracknell Forest Borough Council in accordance with paragraph 2 of Schedule [] to the [] Regulations 2006 ('the 2006 Regulations'), hereby makes the following directions:

Electronic Communications

Direction of Timothy Wheadon, Chief Executive of **Bracknell Forest Borough Council**, under The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit reduction scheme (Electronic Communications) (Miscellaneous Benefits) Order 2006.

Bracknell Forest Borough Council ("the Authority") in accordance with paragraph 2 of:

- Schedule 11 to the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006;
- Schedule 10 to the Housing Benefit (Persons who have attained the qualifying age for state pension credit) Regulations 2006;
- Schedule 9 of the Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006;
- Schedule 8 to the Council Tax Benefit (Persons who have attained the qualifying age for state pension credit) Regulations 2006.

Hereby makes the following directions:

1. An individual who, in accordance with the 2006 Regulations makes a claim for Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit reduction under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits act 1992 or the Authority's Local Council Tax Benefit Reduction Scheme is authorised to do so by an electronic communication, provided that the individual uses the method approved by the Authority in relation to the claim.
2. The methods and form set out, at the time of, and for the purposes of, the delivery of such a claim as referred to in paragraph 1, are respectively:

- Electronic applications for council tax benefit reduction / housing benefit provided they are made via self-service e-benefits phone or face to face interview with an officer of the Authority or a person acting as its agent and are received in the Authority's official benefits computer system or on-line via the Authority's computer system.
- Electronic amendments to claims (i.e. changes to claims prior to the initial decision on an award of benefit) made via a phone or face to face assisted interview with an officer of the Authority or a person acting as its agent or on-line via the authority's computer system.
- Electronic notification of changes of circumstance made via a phone or face to face assisted interview with an officer of the Authority or a person acting as its agent or on line via the Council's computer system.
- Electronic applications for benefit by phone may be made via 01344 352010
- Email communication should be made to the email address onlinebenefits@bracknell-forest.gov.uk or to the emails address or the Council officer dealing with the benefit claim if the claim has already been assessed.
- Notifications submitted via any other Authority email addresses or phone numbers will not be acceptable.
- The person making an electronic claim, amendment or change of circumstances may be asked to sign the electronic document produced using a manual or electronic method.
- To ensure the authenticity of the identity of the sender the electronic communication must include the following:
 - The claimant's name and any two of the following:
 - The address of the benefit claim;
 - The claimant's date of birth;
 - The claimant's National Insurance number;
 - The claimant's Benefit reference number;
 - Details on members of the household.
- The Authority may accept digital photographic and scanned images of notices, forms, evidence, and information provided by a person where a claim has already been

assessed. Where a new claim is made the Authority will request to see the required original documents .

- The person must keep a copy of any electronic communication, reference number generated, claim, certificate, notice, information, or evidence so that it can be produced where the Authority so requires. Failure to produce on reasonable request the evidence requested may be deemed to show that an electronic communication was not successfully made to the Authority.
- Electronic communications received after 5pm Monday to Thursday and after 4.30pm on Friday or on a Saturday or Sunday will be treated as though they are received on the following working day. Monday to Friday are deemed to be working days except where they are statutory holidays or the Authority has decided that the offices will be closed to the public for whatever reason.
- The Authority's 'official computer system' for the purposes of recording information relating to electronic communications is provided by Northgate Information Systems Ltd for Revenues and Benefits. Iclipse is the Authority's integrated document information and workflow system and is also regarded as an 'official computer system' for the purposes of recording information relating to electronic communications.

3. The Authority may require further information or original supporting evidence before the claim for Housing Benefit and/or Council Benefit reduction can be assessed / revised. The Authority may verify claims, certificates, notices, information or evidence by using third party systems and sources of information as well as by direct contact with a person using electronic communications or by some other means.

4. Any claim, amendment or notification received that:

- a) Does not conform to any of the relevant standards will be invalid;
- b) Does conform to the above standard but is not accepted by the Authority's official computer system, is not regarded as having been delivered.

5. This direction may be withdrawn or amended at any time by the issue of a further direction

Signed by:.....

Dated:.....

Chief Executive