

Equalities Monitoring – Services

H - Welfare & Housing

Annual Report - 2019-20



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Welfare Service

1. Introduction

The Welfare Service administers housing benefit on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Bracknell Local Council Tax Discount Scheme (LCTDS), and discretionary welfare payments of crisis grants, home emergency grants, discretionary housing payments and council tax hardship. Both housing benefit and local council tax discount scheme are means-tested benefits requiring the collection of information about people's financial and household circumstances. The service undertakes benefit assessments, collection of overpayments and works with the DWP by referring cases for fraud investigation.

The Government's Welfare Reform Act 2012 has introduced various changes over the last few years including those such as the Benefit Cap and Social Sector Size Restriction which has as a result affected customer's entitlement to Housing Benefit as well as other welfare benefits. The Local Council Tax Discount Scheme introduced income bands in April 2017. Since 23 May 2018 Universal Credit Full Service has been implemented, which has resulted in the majority of new claims for working age households now having to claim their housing costs through Universal Credit instead of Housing Benefit and has resulted in a decrease to the Welfare Service Housing Benefit caseload.

At Bracknell Forest Council two emergency discretionary welfare schemes are administered; crisis grants and home emergency grants. The purpose of these schemes is to help people who have an unforeseen financial crisis. As the awards are discretionary the Council must consider each application carefully, based on the circumstances of each individual.

Housing Service

The Housing Service deals with all aspects of housing need, but in particular:

- Homelessness and Homeless Prevention
- Housing Register - BFCMyChoice
- Shared Ownership (Homebuy)
- Nominations to Housing Associations
- Assistance with securing private sector tenancies
- Management of temporary accommodation for homeless households

We give housing advice and assistance in confidence on a wide range of issues including homelessness prevention, tenancy rights and domestic violence.

We work closely with colleagues in other teams and agencies such as the Community Mental Health Team, the Community Team for People with Learning Disabilities, Occupational Therapists and, Children's Services particularly when dealing with vulnerable applicants.

Those who access our services are recorded on the housing and homeless registers.

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Customers are able to access the Welfare and Housing Service by various means. The service is open to all members of the public via appointments in person to our reception. Whilst we encourage face to face contact with customers, we appreciate that not all customers wish to, or are able, to access our service via this route and so customers can contact us by telephone and email. Customers can access an online e-benefits account when making a new claim and report any change in circumstances to housing benefit and local council tax discount scheme and can access BFC My Choice to make an application to be placed on to the housing register. We will however, offer appointments when needed to customers who have difficulties claiming online; offer home visits for customers who are not able to come into our offices due to ill-health or disability and offer paper applications when needed to ensure that nobody is excluded from claiming.

Bracknell Forest Council has a number of volunteer members of staff who speak other languages if needed to provide translation or interpretation services. A professional translation service is also available.

Whilst Universal Credit is a change implemented by and administered by the DWP; the Welfare Service have taken steps to minimise any negative impact of this change by ensuring the service provides assistance to customers when needed to claim and offering advice with personal budgeting.

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A range of information is collected by the Welfare and Housing Service which helps to understand who is accessing our service and the outcomes for those who access the service compared to Bracknell Forest population.

The data that is gathered includes:

- Race
- Sexual Orientation
- Age
- Disability
- Sex
- Religion

We are not currently able to analyse the remaining protected groups however this can be considered for future reports when data is available.

Historically the number of customers who access the Welfare Service and who are aged 60 or over and those with a disability are higher compared to Bracknell Forest population. This is to be expected due to the nature of the service and likely due to being less able to work and therefore on a lower income.

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The purpose of equalities monitoring is to ensure the Council is providing a fair and equitable service to all residents and having due regard to meet the 3 aims of the general equality duty.

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The service is aware of the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and that it is unlawful to discriminate, treat some people less fairly or put them at a disadvantage.

Staff have all attended internal and external training sessions to ensure that we meet the needs of all of our customers. This improves equality of treatment by enhancing our ability to identify and respond to those with protected characteristics who encounter council services. We recognise that people have different needs and understand that treating people equally does not always involve treating them all exactly the same.

The service records when possible and appropriate the protected characteristics of our service users.

The Council's complaints policy sets out the procedures through which we deal with any complaints.

Equality impact assessments are used by the service to inform decisions on changes affecting the service. The service believes in providing support to anyone who needs it and who is eligible for support, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation or disability.

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A specialist Rough Sleeper Team was formed in 2019 to proactively reach out to and support rough sleepers and break down barriers in accessing the service. Outcomes for these groups are access to healthcare, safe and sustainable accommodation and opportunities for employment.

With the advent of Covid 19 and the Government's "everyone-in" agenda, the Team's response was swift and inclusive. Liaising with clients and partners in Health and substance misuse services, we were able to identify those individuals with underlying health conditions that made them more vulnerable to the virus and who required self-contained accommodation.

A number of our Temporary Accommodation properties were furnished and equipped with white goods in anticipation of the need to make these emergency placements. Discussions took place with a number of B&B and hotel proprietors to encourage them to reopen to ensure that sufficient rooms were available to meet the demand, and health and safety and compliance checks were undertaken to ensure their suitability. The provision of cooking facilities, microwaves and fridges was arranged and through the work of many partners within the local community, food parcels and hot meals were arranged. Mobile phones were provided to clients to enable access to support. For those individuals without a local connection, arrangements were made for them to be reconnected with their home areas.

The current profile of rough sleepers in Bracknell shows that there is little movement into the borough from other areas with the overwhelming majority having a local connection and whilst female rough sleepers make up 16% of the total, white males aged between 25 and 55 predominate. Substance misuse problems are significant for all ages and both men and women. We are fortunate to have good working relationships with New Hope, Bracknell's substance misuse service, and access to a specialist GP service working with homeless people.

The Rough Sleeper Team coordinate packages of support and access to specialist services for rough sleepers and former rough sleepers who we continue to support.

- substance misuse services in the borough are able to coordinate support to try to prevent placement breakdowns.
- we work closely with Probation services to ensure that effective notifications are received before prison releases.
- the partnership recognises that there is more to be done in promoting timely referrals under the 'Duty to Refer' prior to hospital discharges. Housing and Community Mental Health services are working to improve referral pathways and to develop better relationships with the discharge teams of the various local hospitals to ensure appropriate discharge arrangements are in place and timely notifications and referrals are made.
- We work closely with our Health partners and a specialist GP service for homeless people is provided through a weekly drop-in session run by local charity Pilgrim Hearts, providing an accessible service for those who are sleeping rough or who have been resettled. The vast majority of the Rough Sleeper Team caseload are registered with a local GP practice.

The service ensures that policies, services and practices reflect our commitment to equality.

Public Sector Equality Duty:

We ensure that we adhere to section 149 (3) (a) of the Equality Act 2010 which sets out the council's responsibility to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic. In considering protected characteristic, we ensure that we remove or reduce any connected impediments that will otherwise render applicants disadvantaged in our assessments.

We have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard to:

- Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it

We also consider applicants rights in relation to their age, disability, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, race, marriage and Civil partnership and religion and satisfy ourselves that they will not suffer prejudice, injury or discrimination by this council's assessment of their applications.

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Equality monitoring is essential to embedding equalities into service delivery planning, accessibility and quality assurance benchmarking. The coming year will be an opportunity to continue to seek to engage with residents to ensure that our services deliver on our commitment to equalities.