

Online Housing Benefits Applications

Committee name	Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee
Officer reporting	Sunita Ghudial, Head of Benefits, Exchequer Services
Papers with report	Addendum – Benefits Service and Coronavirus
Ward	All

HEADLINES

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Housing Benefits and Council Tax Reduction online application processes and services. This update report was agreed by the Committee following a request by Councillor Janet Gardner.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Committee notes the contents of the report and seeks clarification from officers, as required.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

This report provides information and analysis on the take-up of the Housing Benefits and Council Tax Reduction online services between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2019.

An addendum has been added to this report to update Members in relation to the Benefits Service in light of the Coronavirus pandemic. This covers the period 1 March 2020 and 31 August 2020.

SUMMARY

The Benefits online facilities were first introduced for new claims only on 12 June 2017 and then rolled out fully on 21 May 2018. This service enables customers to apply and report changes for Benefits and Council Tax Reduction online 24/7 at their convenience, thus improving equality of access for residents.

The move to online services makes it easier for residents to make applications and also enables them to receive their initial payment faster. It has also been brought in as part of the national shift towards claiming benefits online, which includes the roll out of Universal Credit (UC).

Universal Credit (UC)

UC was fully rolled out in Hillingdon on 24 October 2018 for working age people on low income administered by the Department of Work and Pensions. It is a single monthly payment which has to be applied for online.

UC has replaced new claims for the following means-tested 'legacy' benefits:

- Housing Benefits;
- Income Supports;
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowances;
- Child Tax Credit;
- Working Tax Credit; and
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

Since the move to UC the Benefits service has seen an ongoing reduction in the number of new Housing Benefits claims received each month. The majority of new claims for help with housing costs are now made through UC. Help with paying Council Tax is not included in the UC claim and a claim for Council Tax Reduction (CTR) has to be made separately and is processed by the Local Authority's Benefits team.

Applications for CTR can be made directly with the council or by the customer indicating they need assistance with their Council Tax on their UC claim form. This then produces a notification directly to the authority, which is then treated as a new claim.

From 24 October 2018 the only new claims for Benefits that can be made are the ones where the following applies:

- Claimant and partner have both reached State Pension age;
- Claimant or partner have been getting Pension Credit since before 15 May 2019;
- Claimant is receiving, or recently stopped receiving, a benefit with a severe disability premium (SDP);
- Claimant lives in temporary accommodation which has been provided or arranged by the council; and
- Claimants' landlord is a County Council, charity or housing association and they provide care or support.

Support for those that need it

The Benefits service continues to provide support for people who do not have access to online facilities or who need assistance to make a claim. There are 11 computers available in the Benefits reception area in the Civic Centre and 4 computers at the One Stop Shop in Hayes. In addition to this, residents can also use the computers at the Council's large number of libraries across the borough. Benefits staff are also available to provide face to face help at the Benefits reception area in the Civic Centre and at times at the One Stop Shop in Hayes.

The Benefits self-service is available as follows:

- **Civic Centre** - Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5pm; and
- **One Stop Shop** - Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5pm, with support and assistance available on Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 12.30pm.

There is also still the option for residents to have paper claim forms where they are unable to access or use the online facilities.

Number of people accessing online services

The table below shows the total number of people that came into the Civic Centre and One Stop Shop to make an application, report a change in circumstances, or to submit supporting documentation online between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2019:

Visits	Total	Average per week
Civic Centre	3,386	130
One Stop Shop	129	5

Number of online Housing Benefits and Council Tax Reduction applications

The table below outlines the number of online applications received between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2019:

Category	No. of new claims	% of total received
Total number of applications received (including paper)	2,168	100%
Number of applications submitted online successfully	1,843	85%
Number of applications unsuccessfully submitted	81	3.7%
Number of paper applications	244	11.3%
Number of applications saved and exited online	362	N/A*

Unsuccessful applications are often due to the claimants not realising that they should have made a claim for UC as Benefits is no longer available to them. This is due to applicants not knowing the changes that have been made to the Benefits system, despite lots of information being available to them. The number of applications saved and exited online (362 *) are not included in the overall total as they are incomplete and pending by the claimants. This is equivalent to 17% of the total applications.

Processing of Claims

Claimants are asked to provide all supporting documents with their online application submission. If all the evidence has been provided, the claim can be assessed immediately. However, sometimes the Benefits team has to contact the customer for further details which means the claim remains pending until we have everything we need to process the claim.

Classification: Public

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Claimants are contacted for further information by phone, email or by letter and have one month from the date of their application to provide all the relevant information to process their claim. Failing to do so would result in their claims being cancelled. A longer period can be considered if merited and/or within reason.

The table below outlines the average processing times on new claims and change in circumstances for 2019/20 (cumulative for the year to date)

Claims	New Claims	Change in Circumstances
Housing Benefits	22.74 days	5.56 days
Council Tax Reduction	26.41 days	9.83 days

The average processing times in respect of the Council Tax Reduction claims are negatively impacted by the 5 week processing period on UC claims, as UC income details are required for processing a Council Tax Reduction claim.

In addition to the above, our online services also extend to residents being given access to view their Council Tax accounts, NNDR accounts and Benefits claim details via the citizen access portal on the Council's website.

Implications on related Council policies

A key role of Policy Overview Committees is to monitor council services and also make recommendations on service changes and improvements to the Cabinet who are responsible for the Council's policy and direction.

The move to Benefits online services forms part of the Council's digital strategy and is in keeping with the Government's agenda for UC online services.

How this report benefits Hillingdon residents

This report outlines the process and outcomes for residents undertaking online Benefits applications.

Financial Implications

The report is for information only. There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

Legal Implications

None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.