

REVENUES AND BENEFITS

Social Fund Task and Finish Group



PLYMOUTH
CITY COUNCIL

Martine Collins

Current Position

The Revenues and Benefits department administers Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for the people of Plymouth. There are currently 31,015 customers in receipt of Housing Benefit and 27,816 in receipt of Council Tax Benefit. Council Tax Benefit can also be paid to owner occupiers of properties who may not be in receipt of Housing Benefit.

As part of administering the benefits, customers who have a shortfall in their rent can apply for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to help towards their rent if they are experiencing hardship or are vulnerable. Applications are assessed and a means test is carried out and those qualifying will receive additional financial support.

As part of Welfare Reform all Local Authorities have had their funding for 2012/2013 increased and for Plymouth this is £224,000. Recent changes to the criteria under which customers can apply for DHP mean that this fund can now also be used for the payment of rent in advance.

The Housing Options team also have a fund that currently pay for rents in advance and work is being undertaken to determine the numbers that are currently paid out and details of this will be available shortly. It is anticipated that the Social Fund will not need to be used for the payment of rents in advance however more work needs to be done to determine this categorically.

Welfare Reform Changes

From April 2013 Council Tax Benefit will be abolished and replaced with a localised Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS). It is proposed that a vulnerability fund be built into the local scheme to help customers experiencing exceptional hardship with their Council Tax.

Revenues and Benefits will continue to administer discretionary funds and the new CTS scheme and the Social Fund can fit alongside this. The department already has access to relevant customer data both in terms of its current activities and through the DWP's IT systems which can be used for the administration of Housing Benefit. Access to this data will allow officers to provide a more efficient service to the customers and help keep administration costs down. The service can provide benefit advice and ensure that relevant customers are accessing the maximum level of benefit that they are entitled to and that the additional help is being drawn from the correct discretionary fund.

The Revenues and Benefits Service has officers experienced in assessing and administering discretionary funds and it has highlighted the need to support staff further in this function as part of the welfare reform changes. The relationship with the customer will change as we move from demand led financial support to fixed funding levels and the service is currently looking at the training requirements needed to equip staff with the necessary skills to manage the change.

The Service is working very closely with Housing Options, the DWP and Job Centre Plus to determine ways of working more closely to assist vulnerable customers. There has been some partnership working with the Citizens Advice Bureau during September and Officers from Housing

Options and Revenues and Benefits have been signposting customers where appropriate for advice. Work is now underway to make this a permanent arrangement.

Dave Saunders

All front line staff will need to be aware of what the Social Fund Replacement is and how it can be accessed.

Libraries can be used to provide information and signpost people on to appropriate agencies.

Revenues and Benefits staff are trained to handle difficult situations which can arise when dealing with angry customers. Diffusion technique training is currently provided for security staff but there is a plan to roll this out to Housing and Revenues and Benefits staff within the next two months.

The Civic Centre's First Stop Reception area is already set up to deal with customers in challenging circumstances and has cubicles where private conversations can be held without compromising staff safety.

The call centre did not currently operate a call-back service as the demand was not there. However, this is something that could be considered if callers were to identify themselves as in crisis.

All calls taken in the call centre are monitored so the number of people waiting at any one time was known – the answer rate was currently 96%, 74% of which was within 7 seconds.