

**Bolsover District Council**

**Customer Service and Transformation Scrutiny Committee**

**13 March 2017**

**Derbyshire Revenues and Benefits Initiative – Housing Benefit and Local Taxation  
Support Verification Policy**

**Report of Assistant Director – Finance, Revenues & Benefits**

This report is public

**Purpose of the Report**

To approve the Housing Benefit and Local Taxation Support Verification Policy as part of implementing the ongoing Derbyshire wide benefits processing initiative.

**1 Report Details**

- 1.1 On 25th April 2016, the Council took the decision to become part of a consortium of Derbyshire authorities working together to improve the Revenues and Benefits Service with the objective of:
- Increasing income collection on Council Tax and NNDR;
  - Securing improvements in the flexibility and accessibility of the service for local residents through enabling internet access;
  - Securing service efficiencies through facilitating the use of self service;
  - Using data matching to reduce the potential for fraud and error;
  - Securing service efficiencies by adopting a risk based approach to handling and managing housing benefit and council tax support claims;
  - Participating in a Derbyshire wide group that may bring further opportunities for service improvement or efficiencies.
- 1.2 To enable some of the above objectives to be met, it was essential to have an intuitive online housing benefit and local council tax support claim form which has the ability to work on any mobile device. This form has now been developed, tested and we are planning to implement from 1 April 2017.
- 1.3 In order to enable the use of this form, the Council are required to adopt a risk based verification policy in relation to processing housing benefit and council tax support claims.
- 1.4 In the early 1990's the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) introduced a "verification framework policy" for administering Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims. This was a voluntary policy that strongly recommended that local Councils should obtain a substantial amount of documentary evidence, carry out numerous pre-payment checks and/or visits before making any payment on a new claim or processing a change in circumstances. It had to be applied to all new claims and

changes, was costly, and there was little scope for local discretion. Although it was abandoned in 2006 by the DWP, most Councils, including Bolsover, have continued to use at least some of the verification guidelines set out in the framework.

In 2011, the DWP allowed Councils to apply a different type of approach to reducing fraud and error, based on Risk Based Verification (RBV) principles. This concentrates on the risk profile of each claimant. Resources can then be targeted at the higher risk groups where the majority of error is likely to occur. It is an approach used by many public services as well as businesses in the commercial world aimed at preventing errors and mistakes from entering into the system at the outset.

- 1.5 The Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support Verification Policy in Appendix 1 will allow the Council to implement a risk based verification approach to assessing its housing benefit and council tax support claims.
- 1.6 The introduction of this policy should deliver service improvements and efficiencies within the team and for residents applying for housing benefit and council tax support. The system will feature secure data protection controls and will be able to be accessed by residents at home, via a mobile device or at the Council offices, enabling residents to process their claims online. This provides a significant improvement in access and convenience for local residents, and facilitates a more timely processing of claims. For the Council, there are significant efficiencies which include the fact that the information provided in the electronic format goes directly into the back office system therefore significantly reducing paper communication and retyping of data.

## **2 Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendation**

- 2.1 This report and the approval of the policy will enable all Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support claims to be assessed using risk based verification from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017. Having this in place from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 will give a clear separation between financial years, therefore making the audit process smoother and more transparent.

## **3 Consultation and Equality Impact**

- 3.1 These have been considered within the policy.

## **4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 4.1 The alternative option would be that the Council decides against implementing the recommendations outlined within this report. This would significantly reduce the opportunity to improve the service to our residents and disadvantage the Council in participating in the Derbyshire wide project.

## **5 Implications**

### **5.1 Finance and Risk Implications**

There are no financial implications arising out of this report.

## 5.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection

Legal and data protection implications have been fully considered during the production of this policy in consultation with the Data Protection Officer.

## 5.3 Human Resources Implication

None arising directly from this report.

## 6 Recommendations

- 6.1 That Customer Service and Transformation Scrutiny Committee notes the Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support Verification Policy to be submitted to Executive for approval.

## 7 Decision Information

<b>Is the decision a Key Decision?</b> (A Key Decision is one which results in income or expenditure to the Council of £50,000 or more or which has a significant impact on two or more District wards)	No
<b>District Wards Affected</b>	N/A
<b>Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework</b>	Providing our customers with excellent services. Transforming our organisation.

## 8 Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Housing Benefit and Local Council Tax Support Verification Policy
<b>Background Papers</b> (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)	
Report Author	Contact Number
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