



Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

Take-up Strategy 2009 – 2011

Introduction

The aim of the Benefit Service is “to ensure we pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time”. Clearly, this take up strategy has a pivotal role to play in ensuring residents in Bracknell Forest received the Housing and Council Tax Benefit they are entitled to.

There is also a statutory requirement to promote take-up detailed in Sections 123(3)(a) and 123(4)(a) of The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992:-

“Every authority awarding Housing Benefit / Council Tax Benefit shall take such steps as appear to them appropriate for the purpose of securing that person who may be entitled to benefit from the authority become aware that they may be entitled to it”.

The latest national statistics on Income-related benefits: estimates of take-up produced by the Department of Work and Pensions were released on 25 June 2009.

Statistics on the latest estimates of take-up of income-related benefits for Great Britain covering: Income Support, Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and income-based Jobseeker’s include data for the period up to the end of March 2008.

The key points from the latest release are:

Income Support – Take-up between 78% and 88% by caseload, compared with between 81% and 90% in 2006-07. There was evidence of decrease in caseload take-up by about one percentage point between 2006 -07 and 2007-08.

Pension Credit – Take-up between 61% and 70% by caseload, compared with between 60% and 69% in 2006-07. There was evidence of an increase in caseload take-up of about one percentage point between 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Housing Benefit – Take-up between 80% and 87% by caseload, compared with between 81% and 87% in 2006-07. There was evidence of a decrease in overall caseload take-up of around one percentage point between 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Council Tax Benefit – Take-up between 62% and 68% by caseload, compared with between 63% and 69% in 2006-07. There was evidence to suggest a decrease in caseload of at least one percentage between 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Jobseeker's Allowance (income-based) – Take-up between 54% and 60% by caseload, compared with between 49% and 60% in 2006-07. There was no conclusive evidence of a change in caseload take-up.

However, due to the current economic climate this data does not fully represent the take-up from April 2008. Bracknell Forest Council's Housing and Council Tax Benefit caseload has increased by 12% from 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Many residents are not receiving what they are entitled to because:-

- Are unaware that they may be entitled to Benefit;
- Have been put off applying for Benefit by the extra rules, procedures and complexity of the application form;
- Dislike or are wary of visiting official premises;
- Those (again usually elderly people) who do not wish to rely on handouts or do not like to disclose details of their income and savings due to the perception of the government prying. These people are harder to reach, but are nevertheless a valid target group for whom the extra income could make a difference to their overall quality of life;
- Have previously been put off applying for Benefit due to the time taken for a claim to be processed;
- The complexity of the claim process;
- The perception that we are prying into their private information;
- Lack of support or personal contact during the claim process;
- An assumption that if the customer claims a DWP state benefit Housing / Council Tax benefit will be dealt with automatically;
- Language barriers;
- Physical / mental inability;
- Inadequate promotion and publicity;
- Lack of joint working.

This take-up strategy will aim to address these issues and in so doing it will support the Council's corporate objective to sustain economic prosperity.

Take-up Strategy Aim and Target

- To maximise take-up of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for those households who are eligible in Bracknell Forest.

The strategy seeks to achieve at least a 1% increase in benefit paid to Bracknell Forest residents from that paid in 2009/10 over the life of the strategy (cash target £300,000).

The Strategy is based around five key objectives:

1. Establishing evidence based and analysis

- Collecting information in order for us to understand Bracknell and it's communities allowing us to identify areas and reasons for low take-up of benefits and ensure that these issues are addressed by targeted campaigns and promotions;
- Evaluate and monitor customer needs in all communities of the borough to identify reasons for low take-up of benefits and address these issues;
- Identify our vulnerable / hard to reach customers in order to provide assistance in claiming benefit;
- Obtain results of take-up campaigns in order to identify successful and unsuccessful activity.

2. Improving Service

- Ensure that staff have the skills and expertise to give customers accurate advice and assistance in relation to claiming benefits;
- Ensure that our partners and stakeholders are able to provide accurate advice and guidance on Housing and Council Tax Benefit issues and promote take up.

3. Joint Working

- Work closely with service partners / stakeholders and Government Agencies, to ensure that the Governments and corporate priorities for Benefit Take-up are achieved.

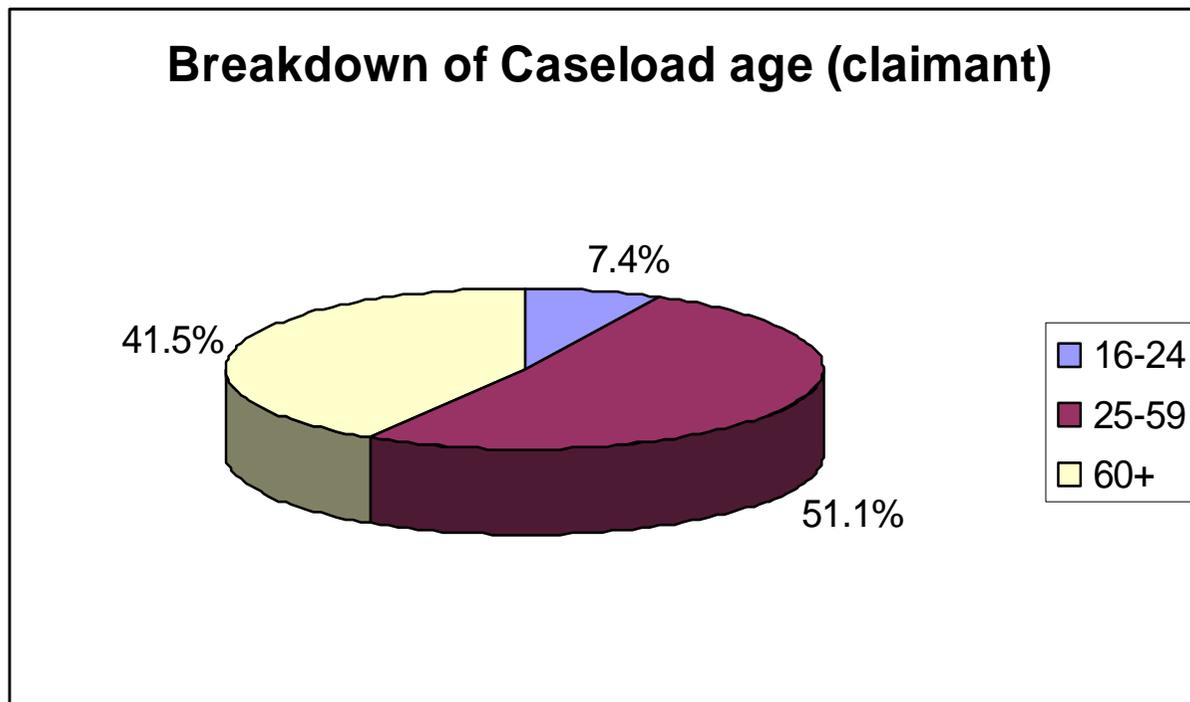
4. Publicity and Promotion

- Effectively promote Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit throughout the borough using a variety of media;
- Benefit by running publicity campaigns and setting up surgeries in variety of locations throughout the borough.

5. Consultation

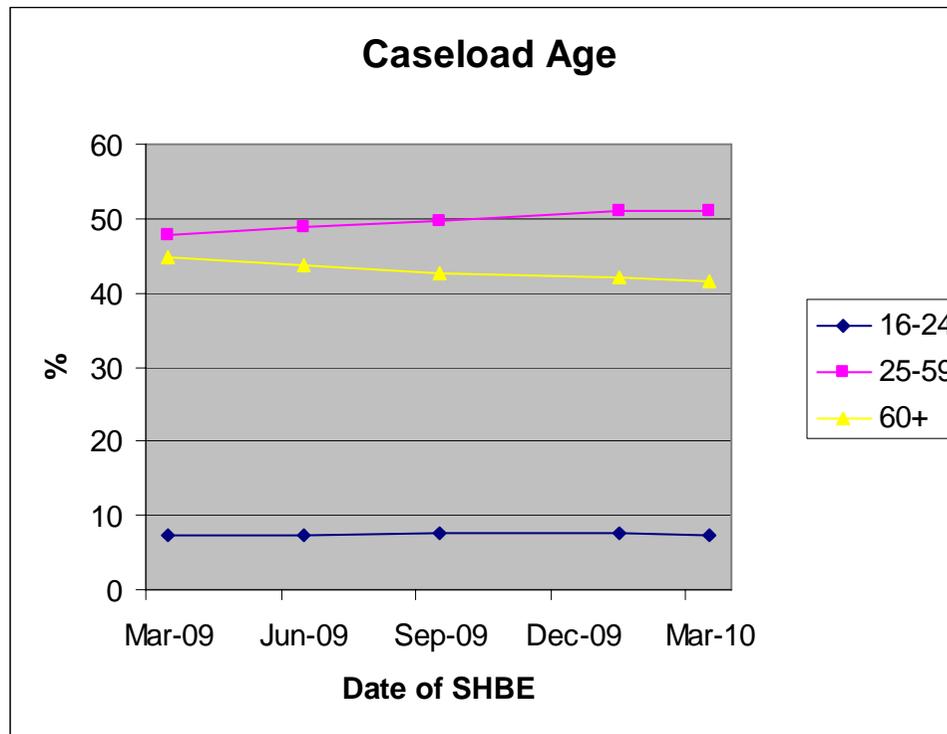
- Seek feedback from customers regarding their experience of making a claim for benefit in order that the process is as straightforward as possible.

Evidence base



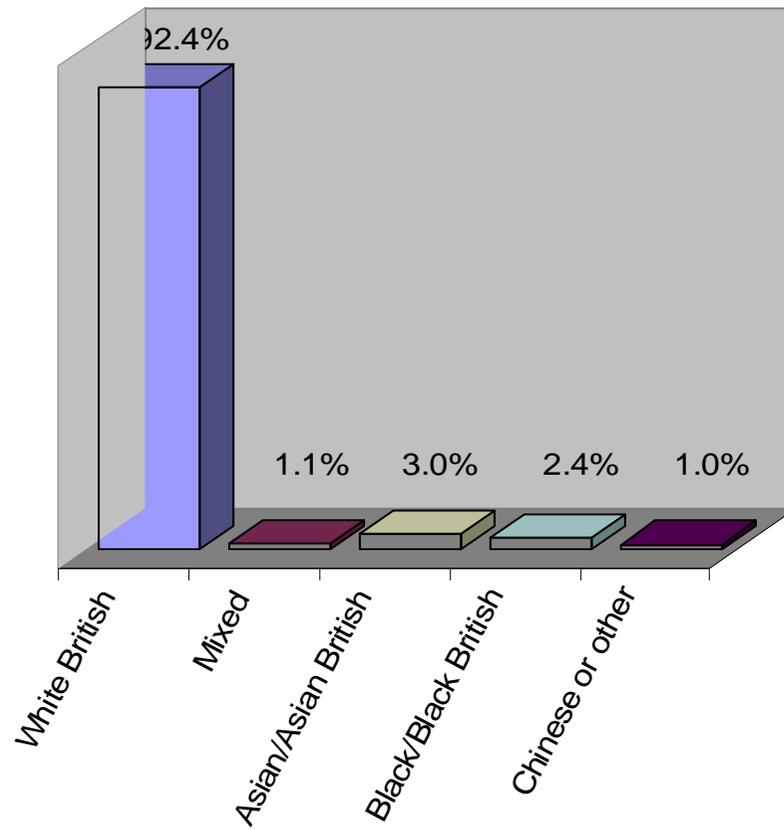
(from SHBE 9/3/10)

Since March 2009 caseload has changed by:



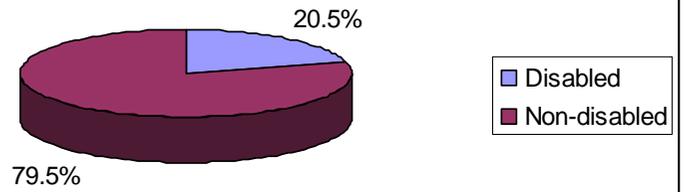
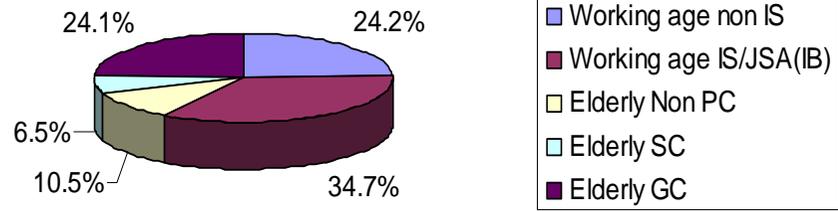
Although there has been an increase in claims of all age groups, the biggest increase has been in age group Working Age 25-59 years.

Breakdown of Ethnic Groups



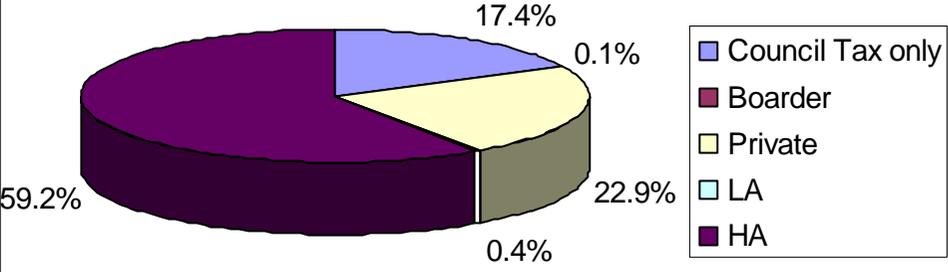
(from Ethnic monitoring sheets/application forms April 09 – March 10)

Income groups



Breakdown of claim – those receiving a disability benefit

Tenancy



Proposed Actions

Appendix 2	Strategy Action Plan.
Appendix 2B	A further table is attached as Appendix 2B of more, which are just as important but will be continuing actions without a specific target date.
Appendix 3	Where mention is made of publications i.e. leaflets and posters etc., these will be targeted at the types of outlets listed in
Appendix 4	Identifies the Stakeholder Group as mentioned (it is intended that this list will be added to and expanded as the take up campaign progresses).

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken on this strategy.

Monitoring and Review

In order to monitor and review the effectiveness of this strategy we will measure the success of publicity drives and take-up campaigns by:-

1. Consulting with our customers to find out how they found out about Housing Benefit and Council Benefit;
2. Identifying any increase in the caseload;
3. Obtain a breakdown of the benefits caseload on a quarterly basis in order to identify any changes in trends regarding take-up;
4. Monitor entitlement and subsidy claim.

This strategy will be reviewed and updated based on the results of monitoring carried out. The policy will be reviewed annually, or sooner if appropriate, to take account of operational adjustments and or changes to legislation.

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 1 Establishing evidence based on analysis	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
	Analysis Mosaic database in comparison to current caseload. Analysis of claimant make-up must be completed. This will give the baseline for any take-up targets of residents not claiming.	January to March 2010	Service Development Officer
	To investigate the potential of GIS and its link to take-up. This is currently being explored as part of the purchase of the Mosaic Software. GIS has helped in analysing the claimant make up, and those residents not claiming in order to target. Able to give specific addresses to target with mail shots rather than general poster campaigns.	On-going	Service Development Officer
	To see if it is possible to recalculate recently cancelled claims in line with new calculation criteria i.e. revised Capital rules for pensioners plus CB disregard. This would enable the Benefit Service to send claims who they believe would be entitled to benefit as a result of amendments to these criteria.	On-going	

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 2 Improving Service	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	Publication new claim form, which will be crystal marked.	April 2010	
All	Distribution of new claim form. New claim form to be made available at additional public outlets to the traditional ones. The main ones to be included are libraries, doctor's surgeries analysis on levels of take-up versus forms requested. In addition to this the application form is also available in downloadable version through the Bracknell Forest Council website.	May 2010	Service Development Officer
All	Introduce and promote "Fast track" scheme Fast track scheme introduced 2008. Fast track scheme promoted flyers being issued with every new claim to achieve a target of 80 Fast track claims processed a month. Scheme promoted via reception plasma presentation, poster being distributed to surgeries, libraries, schools, post offices etc.,	Ongoing	Assessment Manager
All	Appointments available for new claims to be completed and information provided. Assessment team proactive in requesting information via telephone and for new claims completing the form via telephone and the customer then visiting the offices to sign the application and provide evidence to support claims	Ongoing	Ongoing
All	Subscribe to www.benefit-leaflets.org Ensure updated leaflets are always printed and available in Time Square. Ensure flyers advising leaflets available in other languages are available in reception and on the Bracknell Forest Council website.	Ongoing	Service Development Officer

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 2 Improving Service	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
Pensioners	To consider the introduction of a form specific for pensioners that mirrors the HCTB1 (PC) – a claim form for Housing Benefit and council Tax Benefit for pensioners. This could potentially reduce the number of pages in an application form used by pensioners from 36 to 24.	November 2010	Service Development Officer
All	Benefits Calculator, this would inform customers of the income limits for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Benefits Calculator available in new system. Monitor hits to website and ensure update.	November 2010	Benefit Manager
Key Objective 3 Joint Working	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	Hold Landlord Forums. Make Landlords aware of the Benefit Scheme and offer training to speed process times for their tenants. Explore holding Landlord Forums with neighbouring LA.	Ongoing	Service Development Officer
All	Identify locations for surgeries in Bracknell Forest area. Surgeries held: Sandhurst Town Council, Owlsmoor Community Centre, Jubilee Court, Mount Pleasant. Surgeries to be held for vulnerable customers in supported housing schemes.	Ongoing	Assessment Manager

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 3 Joint Working	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	Joint working with DWP / Pension Service To work towards Benefits Service staff being able to verify evidence for these claims. Liaising with Rapid Response Team in Jobcentre Plus to target companies where redundancies occurring.	July 2010	Benefit Manager
Pensioners	Work in partnership with EBC. Concessionary Fares department to send leaflets out with their documentation to customers	Ongoing	Benefit Manager
Disabled Groups	Liaise with other disabled organisations e.g. Deaf Association, physically disabled, Alzheimer's Society etc., to look at under claiming minorities. To look at tailored publicity which can be targeted with the aims of each specific group in mind.	December 2010	Service Development Officer
Key Objective 4 Consultation	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	Publicise Take-up Strategy Write to: Local Councillors, MP, DWP, CAB, relevant internal departments, stakeholder groups, informing them of Take-up Strategy	Following adoption of Strategy April 2010	Benefit Manager
All	Target one under claiming group at a time. Plan dates for each target group. Child Benefit. Pensioners November Vulnerable customers in Supported Housing. School leavers.		Service Development Officer

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 4 Consultation	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	BFC Website to include Customer & Landlord Newsletters. Also “What’s New” to publicise CTB / HB. Check website has all the information required and update if necessary. 6 monthly newsletters available to download. Additional page added to website with benefit changes.	Ongoing	Service Development Officer
All	Council Tax Coupon Flyers – new flyers to be inserted with first in first bill issued to charge payer and council tax reminder and then summons run to publicise assistance for those having difficulty paying.	Ongoing to March 2011	
All	Posters – new poster campaign aimed at benefit take up. Posters to be placed in all Council buildings, doctors surgeries, community centres and post offices.	June	Service Development Officer
All	Second Adult Rebate – flyer in on going bills to publicise this much under claimed benefit. Council Tax flyer coupon currently advertises this and leaflet that goes out in annual billing.	From March 2010	
All	BFC Website updated to include link to: www.benefit-leaflets.org	Ongoing	Service Development Officer
Pensioners	Benefits Service to publicise availability of benefits by doing interviews on local radio stations. Possibility to be explored of doing this both on BBC Radio Bracknell Forest and Hospital radio. Ideal time would be week of annual bill issue. Information given to be targeted at pensioners but would cover other groups.	September 2010	Benefit Manager

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 4 Consultation	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
Pensioners	Article in Age Concern. Liaise with Age Concern and offer surgery at the Bracknell office. Currently advertise through Age Concern and attend their Open Days.	September 2010	Service Development Officer
Pensioners	Hand out leaflets, applications for claim forms etc., at venues where the elderly are likely to frequent e.g. supermarkets, bingo halls, lunch clubs.	Ongoing	Benefit Manager
All	Articles in local parish magazines. Explore possibility of putting article in magazines – find out what parishes there are e.g. Sandhurst, Binfield etc.,		Benefit Manager
All	To produce a flyer to those taken up residence in the area for the first time. This information may be sought from Council Tax records.	August 2010	Service Development Officer
All	To use the annual / rolling review of SPD, to advertise the availability of the scheme.		Service Development Officer
All	Articles in target group magazines. Age Concern; Council A-Z services; Heatherwood & Wexham Bedside folders. Exploring advertising in publications targeting the Registered Blind. Working age customers i.e. school newsletters.	Ongoing	Benefit Manager
All	Explore the possibility of promoting Benefit Take-up advertising through Community TV.	July 2010	Service Development Officer

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2010 / 12 – Proposed Actions

Key Objective 4 Consultation	Proposed Action	When	Who will lead
All	Explore the possibility of promoting Benefit Take-up advertising through supermarket advertising.	July 2010	Service Development Manager
People in Band F, G, H properties (likely to be older age group)	Mail shot proposed at those in these 3 bands to offer help with payments.	Ongoing	Service Development Officer
School leavers / young claimants	Presentations to school leavers and trainees about availability of CTB / HB as well as paying Council Tax.	Ongoing	Service Development Manager
Disabled groups – blind people	Liaise with Blind Associations to consider publicising benefit take up among those registered blind. We already have a list of current claimants who are registered blind, but not of all other members of community who are blind. Associations may be able to provide list of contacts.	December 2010	Service Development Manager
All	Backdated Benefit. Ensure new claimants are aware that claims can be backdated.	May 2010	
All	Promote DHP.	Ongoing from April 2010	Assessment Manager

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2009 / 10 – Generic and Ongoing Actions

Specific targeted group	Details of proposed action	Comments	Timescale
All 2	Customer services to promote benefit take up at every opportunity.	Team Leaders and specialists to monitor as part of ongoing quality checks.	
All 2	Ongoing management of Benefit processing.	To achieve, then consistently perform in the upper quartile of processing new claims and change of circumstances. A high speed assessment service would assist in the image we have with existing and potential customers. Potential customers would be more likely to apply for benefits when we offer a fast and effective service.	
All	Continue to spread the word about benefit take up at all meetings and presentations carried out.		Ongoing
All	BFC website – continue to use this as means of publicity.	To regularly review information on website to ensure updated information available.	Ongoing
All	To communicate the Benefit scheme to BFC employees who visit the homes i.e. Care Assistants, Home Help, Grants Officers etc.,	These BFC employees could capitalise on their personal knowledge and promote the availability of the scheme.	Ongoing
Disabled and Minority groups i.e. single parents	Use lists from Community Liaison Officer / Corporate Officers to identify additional groups and organisations as part of overall role to whom the message can be communicated via presentations etc.,	Can also identify additional groups by checking disabled web sites, telephone directory and by asking current contacts for names of other organisations.	ongoing

Benefits Take-up Strategy 2009 / 10 – Generic and Ongoing Actions
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Specific targeted group	Details of proposed action	Comments	Timescale
All	Ensure right benefit is paid to the right person at the right time.	Quality controls in place. Fraud awareness training plan. Change of Circumstances flyers (campaigns)	

Target outlets for posters leaflets etc.

Doctors surgery waiting rooms

Dentist waiting rooms

Community Centres

Local British Legions & Working Men's Clubs

Drug Rehabilitation Units

Where Mother & Toddler Groups meet (Nursery Schools etc)

Single Parents groups

Disabled Groups meet

Local Schools (for School Leavers)

Local Authority customer facing services (eg. Town Hall & Area Housing Office receptions, Library services (particularly Mobile Libraries), Village Halls etc.)

CAB & Shelter

Sheltered Housing

Help the Aged/ Age Concern

Local DWP Offices/ Employment Centres

Post Offices

Local Supermarkets/ Local Village shops

Sports Centres

Local Hospital

Garden Centres

Village and Community Halls

RSL

Landlords and letting agents who have a public shop front

Pensioner activity groups

Lunch clubs

Churches

Libraries

Childrens centres and nursery's

Stakeholder groups

ECC Housing – Housing Options team /Forest care

BFH – RSL

BFH Tenant's forum

Citizen's Advice Bureau

Private Sector Housing Forum (private landlords)

SPECIFIC LLs (private landlord)

Department for Work and Pensions including

Job Centre Plus

New Deal

Pensions Service

Income Support

RSL

Refuges – refuge for those fleeing domestic violence

Local Homelessness Forum which includes attendees from many of the above plus

NHS Smoking Cessation group