

Benefit changes to benefit your tenants!

For families from 2nd November 2009 Child Benefit is no longer taken into account as income when calculating Housing and Council Tax Benefit.

And please don't forget that from October 2008 we no longer count child maintenance into account as income!

These important changes may mean that many tenants may now qualify for benefit.

Good news for pensioners also from 2nd November 2009 the lower capital limit for pension age claims has now increased to £10,000

To find out whether your tenant now qualifies for benefit please have them contact The Benefits Service

'Benefits for you' Roadshow

The Benefits Service held a 2nd 'Benefits for you' event at Princess Square in August 2009. A huge 'thank you' to all those who came to see us at our event. The day was a success and we were able to give benefits advice, information on other council services, and free goodies to take away.

Advice was also given to many residents about the NHS Stop Smoking Service; home insulation grants; and advice on various subjects from Citizens Advice Bureau and the services they offer.

Our face painter kept numerous young people entertained, and our prizes have

been sent to residents who entered our free prize draw .

We hold these events to take our service to the residents of the borough and to raise awareness to benefits and discounts that they may be entitled to.

We aim to hold these events annually, with the next one planned for summer 2010.

As well as these annual events we are continuing to hold Benefit surgeries and events with other organizations to increase the take up of Housing and Council Tax

Benefit. Please see the 'dates for your diary' section on page 4.

In the current economic climate it is important to encourage people to try to maximize their income and so please make your tenants aware of our surgeries and events.



Do you have any advice that you would like to share with other readers?

We would like to feature a problem and advice section in future newsletters and so if you would like your problem or advice featured then please email nicola.jolly@bracknell-forest.gov.uk or write to us at the Benefit Service

Customer Satisfaction Survey

We wanted to know what our customers thought about our service and if there was anything we could do to improve it further.

During May and June we sent survey's to a number of our customers who had used our service and our results showed that:

77% of our customers who responded rated our service overall as good.

Although this is an increase to our last customer survey carried out in 2007, we want all

of our customers to be satisfied with our service.

The main areas of concern that arose from the survey was difficulties in getting through to the Benefits Service on the phone; and the speed of processing customers claims and changes.

In response to this we have introduced a new telephone system from 1st October. This has helped us to monitor the number of incoming calls and shows how many calls are waiting or abandoned. We can now increase the number of

advisors on the telephones during busy periods.

In order to increase processing times we are phoning customers for further information needed and we are also encouraging customers to use our fast-tracking system where we can process their claims within 2 working days if we have the claim form together with all the information needed.

Please encourage your tenants to use this service.

Private Rented Sector Landlord Forum



Further to our last landlord forum held 9th July 2009 we have decided NOT to hold these forums quarterly as previously stated.

After consulting with other Local Authorities it was agreed that it was more beneficial to

hold these events annually or at most twice a year.

If you have any suggestions on the type of content you would like covered or information you would like available at future forums then please

contact us with your ideas.

We will inform you of the date of the next forum once this has been confirmed. In the meantime, if there are any important benefit changes we will notify you via the newsletter.

Housing and Council Tax Benefit performance

Month	No. of days to process new claims	No. days to process change of circumstances
April - June 09	29.9 days	11.2 days
July - Sept 09	29.7 days	11.2 days
October 09	24.6 days	9.3 days
November 09	21.1 days	11.8 days



Does your tenant need extra help with their rent or council tax?

The **Discretionary Housing payment (DHP)** is a scheme to give financial assistance to people who don't get all of their rent or council tax paid and are struggling to pay the shortfall.

They are not payments of Housing Benefit but are additional payments made at the discretion of the Council. They are based on individual circumstances and your tenant will need to complete a DHP application form and tell us what their outgoings are and all income is in order for us to decide whether we can help

them or not.

We are subject to a legal limit each year on the amount that can be paid and so once the annual fund has been awarded we are unable to make any more payments.

Since April 2009 The Benefits Service have awarded £8719 in DHP funds. We have £7693 left in to award between now and 31st March 2010. We will publish how much money we have left in the fund every quarter in our offices at Time Square.

If your tenant is struggling to pay the shortfall in their rent or council tax and would like to apply for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) then please encourage them to contact the Benefits Service or download a Discretionary Housing Payment form from our public website.

Please remember once the funding is gone its gone! so don't delay, get your tenant to apply for DHP today.

How does your tenants overpayment effect you?

Inevitably when a tenant has claimed Housing Benefit an overpayment may result due to a change in circumstances. The overpayment can normally be recovered via deductions from the tenants ongoing benefit, or by issuing

an invoice to either the tenant or to the landlord depending on the reason for the overpayment and if we have been paying benefit direct to the landlord.

The amount we deduct from the tenants ongoing

benefit are set rates dependant on their circumstances and it is the responsibility of the tenant to make up the shortfall in the rent.

However, if your tenant is struggling to make up this shortfall then please have

them contact the Benefits Service to consider whether we can reduce the amount we deduct.

Although it may take longer to pay the overpayment off this may help your tenant during difficult times.

Local Housing Allowance rates for December 2009

Broad Rental Market Area	Shared room	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom	5 Bedroom
Reading	£80.31	£150.00	£184.62	£207.69	£288.46	£450.00
Blackwater Valley	£80.77	£138.46	£173.08	£207.69	£288.46	£392.31
East Thames Valley	£87.00	£151.15	£196.15	£230.77	£346.15	£588.46

Merry christmas and a happy new year!



Dates for your diary

25th and 28th December 2009 1st January 2010	Benefits Service closed for Xmas and New Year
12th January 2010 (1pm-3pm) Owlsmoor Community Centre	Bracknell Forest Homes tenants and Benefits Service surgery
23rd February 2010 (1pm-3pm) Owlsmoor Community Centre	Bracknell Forest Homes tenants and Benefits Service surgery
23rd March 2010 (1pm-3pm) Owlsmoor Community Centre	Bracknell Forest Homes tenants and Benefits Service surgery

How to contact us:

General benefit enquires	01344 351866
Help on how to complete an application form	01344 351877
Overpayment Recovery	01344 351309
Cheat Chasers	0800 590437
Investigation Officer	01344 351307
Email	benefits@bracknell-forest.gov.uk
Public Website	www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk

Or you can write to us at our offices at Time Square, Market Street, Bracknell, Berks RG12 1HJ. Our office opening hours are 8.30am - 5.00pm Monday to Friday.

Don't forget it is important that you tell us straight away of any changes in your tenants circumstances as it may effect the amount of benefit they are entitled to.

If you would like future newsletters emailed to you then please contact nicola.jolly@bracknell-forest.gov.uk

If you require a copy of this newsletter in large type, please telephone
01344 351689