

# Benefits in Brief

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## A Great Value Service

**STOCKTON** was one of only three English unitary or county councils to achieve the top 'excellent' rating for the way it uses its resources in a recent report by the Audit Commission. The first annual Organisational Assessment formed part of a new nationwide system of rating councils. The report says that Stockton Borough Council has a strong value for money culture and provides high quality services at low cost. It gave Stockton the highest possible ratings of 'excellent' for managing its finances, governing its business and its use of resources.

Here in Benefits our aim has always been to provide an excellent, value for money service, and we regularly compare our performance with other councils in the country to check how we are doing. Our checks last year concluded that we were providing a better than average service, at under half of the average cost per transaction for the group!

Of course the recession has affected our workload considerably and we are working to make sure that everyone who is entitled to benefit makes a claim.

Our caseload is rising fast – and in fact has shown the highest rate of increase in the north east. We have taken on additional staff to deal with the extra work and now we are making decisions on claims quicker than ever – latest figures show an average of 11 days to decide a new claim or a report of a change in circumstances.

We have been making improvements to our contact arrangements too with housing and council tax benefit advice being one

of the first services to be offered in the Council's new Contact Centre in Thornaby – there's more about this on page 3.

We are always looking for ways to improve our service, so if you have any comments or suggestions we would be delighted to hear from you. Call our helpline on 01642 393829 or e-mail [benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk) You can also write to us at 16 Church Road, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1TX, or drop into reception at Stockton or Thornaby.

## Useful Contacts

**Tristar Homes Customer Service Centre**  
For all your enquiries.  
Telephone: 0844 736 0007

**North East Illegal Money Lending Team**  
Stop Loan Sharks,  
call in confidence.  
Helpline: 0300 555 2222



**Stockton-on-Tees**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Stockton Benefits Service, 16 Church Road, Stockton-on-Tees. TS18 1TX

# Moving home?

**Housing Benefit can only be paid when you are living in a property as your home, unless there are special circumstances.**

Most people plan their move in advance. If you intend to move out of your home you need to let your landlord know in advance by giving notice, usually of one or two months. Check your tenancy agreement to find out how much notice you must give. Failure to tell your landlord that you are moving will usually result in your landlord charging you rent for a property you no longer live in.

As soon as you move out of the home you are living in you have a responsibility to inform the Benefits Service and your landlord immediately. You

should hand the keys to your home to your landlord as soon as you move out. If you do not do so more benefit may be paid than you are entitled to and must be paid back.

If Housing Benefit is being paid direct to your landlord it is still your responsibility to inform the Benefits Service that you have moved out. If you do not do so, even though you have not received the benefit, we may still decide to recover any overpaid benefit from you.

## Avoidable Contact

Each year the Benefits Service along with many other services in the Council analyse all of the contacts you make with us by telephone, reception, by email, through the web and by letter. We do this to find out if we could have prevented the need for you to contact us, for example by contacting you sooner or giving you clearer information. By analysing all contact we hope to be able to change the service to make it better for you. Also, by reducing the need for you to contact us it helps us to save money.

During November 2008 we found that 29% of your enquiries could have been avoided. We put together an action plan of areas where we felt we could make improvements to the service to avoid the need for you to get in touch. These included:

- Improving information contained in our decision letters.
- Making sure you knew how quickly we would deal with your benefit claim.
- Making sure we didn't ask for the same information on more than one occasion.
- Looking to see if we could make our claim form easier to complete.

In November 2009 we saw an improvement in avoidable contact with a reduction of almost 50%. Most significant is that less of you are finding it necessary to contact us to find out what is happening with your claim. Two reasons for this are because we are making decisions more quickly and because you are more aware of how long it is likely to take to make a decision on your claim.

We will continue to monitor avoidable contact each year and will look for further ways of offering you a better service first time.

## We've reached Customer Service Excellence standard!

The Government wants public services for all that are efficient, effective and excellent – with the citizen always and everywhere at the heart of public service provision. With this in mind Customer Service Excellence was developed.

Stockton Council is committed to meeting the Customer Service Excellence standard for all services by August 2010.

Benefits along with Housing Services, was one of the first services to step forward for assessment for this standard.

### What happened?

We provided evidence to show how we met each of the following criteria:

- Customer Insight – understanding our customers and what they want from us.
- Culture – those who work in the organisation are committed to customer excellence.
- Information and Access – we provide information to you that you can access.
- Delivery- how we provide our service to you and how this affects you.
- Timeliness and Quality of Service.
- Service Equality – the same standard of service is provided to all of our customers.

We were also visited by an external assessor who questioned us further and viewed for themselves the work undertaken. We fully met the criteria and received positive feedback from the assessor. The assessor's role is also to help us improve our service and areas were identified which we could develop.

If you have any ideas on how we can improve the service we provide to you, let us know. You can call **Michelle Degnan** on **01642 526633** or e.mail [michelle.degnan@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:michelle.degnan@stockton.gov.uk)

# Change in your Circumstances?

Over the last year we have been looking at how we can help you, our customers, report changes to us to ensure you are receiving your correct entitlement to benefit. During this time we carried out some exercises around changes in circumstances.

We randomly selected 100 customers and wrote to them. The letter contained details of the income we were using in the calculation of their benefit. We asked them to check the income we had used, then tell us of any changes or let us know if nothing had changed. Of the 100 customers, 46 reported a change and 44 told us that they had no change. The remaining ones were visited to check their circumstances.

Of the changes reported some were entitled to more benefit and others had been overpaid. We are currently repeating this exercise.

We also carried out a survey – ‘Help Us to Help You!’ This was to help us look at ways to improve the reporting and processing of changes. As a department we understand that sometimes our customers can be confused about what to report, who to report it to and where to report it. This in particular applies to customers who claim other benefits or tax credits.

We wrote to 250 of our customers asking for their views regarding changes in circumstances. We wanted to know:

- How quickly you thought a change should be reported.
- How you found out about reporting a change.
- Which information forms you found the most useful.
- The changes you knew you should report to us.
- The way you prefer to tell us of a change and why you prefer that way.
- If you had reported a change in the last six months, how you rated the way we dealt with the change.
- How quickly you thought we should process your change.

We found that 29% of people would not tell us straight away if they had had a change. Changes in circumstances can affect your entitlement to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. If you do not tell us straight away of the change, you may lose out on benefit, or there could be an overpayment which we may need to recover.

Some people were not aware that changes to childcare charges, tax credits, Disability Living Allowance and capital needed to be reported. Also, some were unaware we need to know if child benefit stops for a child. To help you be more aware of what needs to be reported we have produced a leaflet. Some of you may already have seen this leaflet. The rest will be sent a copy in due course.

May we take this opportunity to thank the customers who took the time to complete and return the survey. The information has been very useful to us.

The work though does not stand still and we are continuing to look at how we can help you report changes and improve the service. If you would like to make any comments about reporting changes and how the process can be improved please write, telephone or email us, your views are much appreciated!



## Customer Service Centres

Stockton Council's customer service centre based in Thornaby Pavillion, in the Town Centre just got better. Residents can now get friendly, face to face help with adult education courses, bus pass requests and recycling enquiries.

These add to the already long list of Council services that both the Thornaby face to face centre and Stockton telephone centre can now deal with. These include bulky household waste removal, business rates, council tax, free school meals, highway maintenance, horticulture, housing and council tax benefits, planning and building control, private sector housing, refuse collection, school admissions and street cleansing. Work to open a new face to face centre in Stockton later this year is currently under way.

To speak with a customer services officer about any of the services listed above please call Stockton 393939 weekdays during normal office hours or Saturday mornings 10am till 1pm.

For more information on the customer service centres please contact Jo Robinson on 01642 527313 or email joanna.robinson@stockton.gov.uk

# A Handy person to know

**A scheme which helps elderly, disabled and vulnerable people maintain their homes is going from strength to strength.**

The Home Improvement Agency (HIA), run for the Council by Broadacres Housing Association, has a popular Handyperson service which is a favourite with residents – so popular more than 948 residents requested the service from April to December 2009.

The Handyperson can undertake small-scale work that takes no more than three hours to complete, such as changing light bulbs/plugs/fuses, putting up shelves or changing locks.

There's also a telephone line for residents wanting advice on how to repair their homes or about housing and planning restrictions.

For the over-60s, the HIA offers a free repair and improvement service specifically aimed at elderly home owners. This ranges from providing a list of contractors to a full service including seeking estimates, appointing contractors and ensuring the work is completed.

HIA will provide as much or as little help as residents want but the aim of the service is to remove the worry associated with organising works and the problems caused by rogue builders.

The agency has been successful in obtaining a further £207,000 (from the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Primary Care Trusts) over the next two years to improve and expand the existing handyperson services. The extra money will also fund schemes to reduce the number of falls and trips in the home and to help elderly people being discharged from hospital.

Julie Nixon, Head of Housing Services at the Council, said: "The additional funding is fantastic news as it will help the Council deliver HIA services to even more people in their own homes. These small but important services will make a big difference to many vulnerable people, simply through knowing they have somebody they can trust to help with their housing problems."

If you would like the assistance of any of the services the Home Improvement Agency can provide, call Broadacres HIA on 01642 345257 or email at [hia@broadacres.org.uk](mailto:hia@broadacres.org.uk)

# Did You Know?

## Winter Warmth

Winter is an especially dangerous time for vulnerable people. You can help keep someone safe this winter:

- Do you know someone who is vulnerable?
- Do they struggle to heat their home?
- Do they use worn, old or damaged heating equipment?
- Are candles being used for lighting?
- Is their gas or electricity off for any reason?
- Is their central heating broken or unusable?

If the answer to any of the above questions is YES! Call Cleveland Fire Brigade urgently on **01429 874063** or e.mail [warmth@clevelandfire.gov.uk](mailto:warmth@clevelandfire.gov.uk)

They will assess their needs & supply equipment to help keep them warm and safe. There are no background checks or forms to fill in.

## How to get in touch

You can contact us by telephone, email, by post or visit us in person.

### By telephone

You can telephone the Contact Centre for advice on (01642) 393829:

Monday to Thursday	8.00am to 6.00pm
Friday	8.00am to 5.30pm
Saturday	10.00am to 1.00pm

Those with hearing difficulties can ring the Minicom (01642) 605569.

### By email

You can contact us by email [benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk)

### By post to

Benefits Service  
16 Church Road  
Stockton on Tees  
TS18 1TX

### By calling in

You can visit our reception at 16 Church Road. The Benefits Service reception is open 8.30am to 5.00pm Mondays to Thursday and 8.30am to 4.30pm on Friday. If you prefer, you can visit the Customer Service Centre at Thornaby Pavilion (Library) who are also open 10.00am to 1.00pm Saturday.