

Benefits in Brief

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Deciding Claims Quickly

The phrase 'Credit Crunch' has been used so widely over the past year that it has been added to the latest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Here in the Benefits Service we saw our workload increase by over 30% during December because so many people have been affected by the current economic climate.

We are extremely aware that now more than ever it is very important for us to be able to process claims for benefit as quickly and efficiently as possible and to minimise any problems that this significant addition to our expected workload could cause.

During the last year we have continually met our target of processing new applications and changes in circumstances within an average of 16 days. We will shortly be taking on some additional staff to help us to continue to deal with your claims quickly.

We do aim to continue to provide excellent value for money and high levels of customer satisfaction during these difficult times. If you have any comments to make

about our service, or can suggest how we could improve our service, we would like to hear from you. You can call on (01642) 393829, e.mail benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk or write to us at the Benefits Service, 16 Church Road, Stockton, TS18 1TX.

Useful Contacts

Consumer Credit Counselling Service

Free, confidential advice and support to anyone who is worried about debt.

Freephone helpline:
0800 138 1111

Cleveland Housing Advice Centre

Free advice and help on a range of benefits, debt and tenancy issues.

Telephone: 01642 254544



Stockton-on-Tees
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Contact Centre

The Contact Centre Service has recently celebrated its first birthday having opened for business at the end of January 2008 offering extended opening hours.

Now it's even easier for customers to find out about Council Tax, Housing and Council Tax Benefit, Care For Your Area services, School Meals and School Admissions and Private Sector Housing services.

Customer Service Officers aim to answer 90% of calls at first point of contact and currently performance is at 96%. In it's first year Customer Service Officers have dealt with over 160,000 calls into the Customer Contact Centre.

Our Aims

- To answer 90% of calls at first point of contact.
- To answer calls in the queue within 3 minutes.
- To keep abandoned calls to less than 10%.
- To answer e-mails within 10 working days.
- To complete customer satisfaction surveys monthly.
- To answer voicemail messages within 24 hours.
- To answer letters within 10 working days.

Opening Hours

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday	8.00am - 6.00pm
Thursday	8.00am - 7.00pm
Friday	8.00am - 5.30pm
Saturday	10.00am - 1.00pm



Customer satisfaction surveys carried out for the Benefits Service from July 2008 to December 2008 indicate that over 95% of customers were satisfied and 70% were very satisfied with the service.

Access Points

In addition to the opening of the Telephone Contact Centre, Customer Service staff currently operate Access Points at, Tesco Ingleby Barwick and Tesco Durham Road, Stockton. A member of staff from Tristar Homes is also present at the Access Point at Durham Road.

National Innovation Award

Stockton Council's Customer Services Division has been shortlisted for the 2009 national contact centre innovation award.

Judging will take place in March, with the final awards being held in London in April.

More choice for Customers thanks to Compass

A change in the way in which vacant properties are allocated is taking place across the Tees Valley sub region in the spring of 2009. The new Choice Based Lettings scheme will replace the existing allocations schemes currently operating in each of the local authority areas.

The new scheme is called Compass, "Pointing you to affordable housing in the Tees Valley".

Compass is a partnership of local authorities and consists of Tristar Homes Ltd, Stockton Borough Council, Erimus Housing, Middlesbrough Borough Council, Hartlepool Borough Council, Housing Hartlepool, Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council, Coast & Country Housing and Darlington Borough Council.

The new Choice Based Lettings system will see vacant properties advertised, and will include property descriptions and photographs. The new IT system will allow applicants registered on the scheme to express their interest in properties which will meet their long term needs, in

various different ways, using internet, telephone and text messaging services, bidding coupons will also be available. Staff will also be available to assist customers from our new premises in Ramsgate, Stockton, expected to open to the public in March.

All applicants currently on the Council's Housing Register were recently sent a new application form; this will allow them to re-register. If you have been sent an application form and wish to participate in the new scheme please ensure you complete and return the application form to the Homechoice & Customer Support Team, Tristar Homes Ltd, Lockheed Court, Preston Farm Ind Estate, Stockton, TS18 3SH. For those who do not return the application form it will be assumed you no longer wish to be registered and your application will be cancelled.

If you have any further queries or require any help with your application form please contact the Homechoice Team on (01642) 527961.

Money Matters - Help & Advice

We all at some point need a little help with money, or the lack of it. This could be;

- finding out the benefits we are entitled to,
- sorting out the money we owe,
- opening a bank account, or
- getting a loan we can afford to repay.

In the Stockton area there is a wide range of help available. The agencies who provide this help meet regularly to identify the problems people in Stockton face, what help they need, and the best ways to provide this help.

Below are some of the agencies and how to contact them:

Christians Against Poverty Telephone; 0800 328 0006 e.mail; Teesvalley@capuk.org	Stockton & District Advice & Information Service Telephone; (01642) 607445
Cleveland Housing Advice Centre Telephone; (01642) 254544 e.mail; advice@chac92.co.uk	Tees Credit Union Telephone; (01642) 753517 e.mail; creditunion-tees@hotmail.co.uk
Council Tax Telephone; (01642) 397108 e.mail; council.tax@stockton.gov.uk	Tristar Homes Telephone; 0800 389 3288 e.mail; debtmanagement@tristarhomes.co.uk
Housing Options Telephone; (01642) 528389 e.mail: housing.options@stockton.gov.uk	Welfare Rights Telephone; (01642) 526141 e.mail: welfarerights@stockton.gov.uk

Help Us to Help You!

Once you have filled in your benefit claim form and sent it to us, you must tell us of any change in the information you have given on the form.

We realise it is hard for you to understand what changes to tell us about and we want to know how we can help make things clearer. Also, it is better for you and for us if you tell us of a change as soon as you become aware of it yourself. Therefore, we want to know how you would like to tell us of a change and which way you find easier.

We will be sending out a short survey to some of you. Please spare a moment to fill in and return this survey form. We want to know your views!

If you do not receive a form you can still send any comments to the Benefits Service, 16 Church Road, Stockton or e.mail, benefits.section@stockton.gov.uk

Some of you may have already received a letter asking you to check the details we hold on our records and to let us know, by completing a simple form, if anything has changed. If you receive one of these letters we would appreciate it if you could take the time to complete the form and return the form to us.

If you are unsure about what changes to tell us, call on (01642) 393829. Our staff will tell you if the change affects your benefit and take the details we need. They will also let you know if we need any documents to confirm what you have told us.

Improving Conditions in Private Rented Accommodation

Stockton Borough Council is considering introducing a landlord Accreditation Scheme in late 2009.

The role of an Accreditation Scheme is to encourage better standards amongst private landlords by asking them to voluntarily sign up to a code of standards. The standards relate both to how the landlord manages the property and the physical condition of the property itself.

An Accreditation Scheme would allow potential tenants to identify which properties are subject to the scheme and help them have more confidence in choosing a property to let.

It would also allow Stockton Borough Council to identify good landlords therefore allowing enforcement resources to focus more effectively on landlords whose properties and management standards do not meet minimum legal requirements.

Well managed housing in good condition has benefits to landlords, tenants and the whole community. If you would like any more information about the proposals please contact Elizabeth Green, Senior Urban Renewal Officer, on 01642 526544 or email elizabeth.green@stockton.gov.uk

Did You Know?

Payments into your bank account.

We can pay your housing benefit if you are a private tenant directly into your bank account. It is a more secure method of payment and the funds are in your account sooner as you don't have to wait for a cheque to clear. Act now and ring on 393829 where an advisor will tell you what information we need!

Lone Parent Changes

Since November 08 most lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over can no longer claim Income Support. They must either apply for Jobseekers Allowance or if they are unable to work due to a health condition or disability, the new Employment and Support Allowance.

Those already on Income Support will be told if and when these changes affect them.

The changes do not apply to lone parents if they:

- have a child who is entitled to the middle-rate or highest-rate care component of Disability Living Allowance,
- get Carer's Allowance, or
- are fostering and have a foster child living with them.

Overpayment recovery rates

From April 09 the Housing Benefit recovery rate from ongoing benefit will increase to £9.75 per week (£10.56 for 48 week rents). For fraudulent overpayments the recovery rate will be £12.80 per week (£13.86 for 48 week rents).

We will continue to review the rate of recovery for any customers who are suffering from financial hardship.

If we have already made an arrangement to recover at a lower weekly amount, this will continue.

Under 25? Want advice?

The Cabin is the place to get help, advice and support. Just drop in at 4 Nelson Terrace, Stockton.

Local Housing Allowance

Local Housing Allowance was introduced 7 April 2008 for most tenants who rent their home from a private landlord. The new rules affect private tenants who after April 08; claimed benefit for the first time, changed address or had a break in their claim. There are currently over 1600 customers receiving Local Housing Allowance in Stockton.

Local Housing Allowance will normally be paid to you. You will no longer have the choice of direct payments to your landlord. Only in certain and limited circumstances will payment be made to your landlord.

If you are receiving payments yourself it is your responsibility to make sure you pay the right amount of rent to your landlord, at the right time. It may be useful to set up a standing order or direct debit with your bank so you do not miss the day your rent is due.

The monthly rates for Local Housing Allowance can be found on our website www.stockton.gov.uk/hsgben and are also displayed at local housing/council offices in the area.

If you need any advice about Local Housing Allowance please ring our Helpline on (01642) 393829 or you may wish to call into our reception at 16 Church Road, Stockton-on-Tees.

How to get in touch

By telephone

If you have a general query you can telephone 01642 393829.

Monday to Wednesday	8.00am to 6.00pm
Thursday	8.00am to 7.00pm
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

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 Monday to Thursday and 8.30am to 4.30pm on Friday.