

Elderly Citizens Liaison Forum

A meeting of Elderly Citizens Liaison Forum was held on Tuesday, 29th August, 2006.

Present: Cllr M Frankland (Chairman); Cllr M Cherrett, Cllr K Leonard, Cllr W Noble, Cllr F G Salt; Mrs E Chapman (St Johns Living Well), Mrs D Fairhurst (Stockton Residents & Community Groups); Mr D and Mrs S Parker (Retired Members Association TGWU)

Officers: Mrs D Berridge, Miss J Higgins (DNS - Benefits); Mrs T Harrison (LD)

Also in attendance: Cllr Mrs A Cains

Apologies: Cllr Mrs J Beaumont and Cllr K Faulks

1 Minutes of the meeting held on 25th July 2006

Members considered the minutes of 25th July 2006.

CONCLUDED that the minutes of 25th July 2006 be approved as a correct record and will be presented a Council

2 Housing and Council Tax Benefits - Deborah Berridge and Julie Higgins (Benefit Service)

Officer from the Housing and Council Tax benefit section addressed the Committee providing information regarding Housing and Council Tax benefits.

Members were advised that applicants and claimants could contact them via the phone helpline or in person and information regarding benefits was on the website.

benefits were means tested, therefore the section needed to know claimants income and savings which included:

- Occupational Pension
- State Pension
- Pension Credit
- Guaranteed Credits (previously known as Income Support)
- Capital (all money in current/deposit accounts, stocks/shares, ISA's, premium bonds etc.)

Disability Allowance, Attendance Allowance and War Pension were not considered. If the applicant had £16,000 or more they did not qualify for benefits.

To make a claim, applicants needed to contact the benefits office or Tristar housing centre for an application form. If they needed help to complete the form they could go to the benefits/Tristar office where officers would help them complete the forms and talk through any concerns in a private interview room. Appointments were not necessary but could be arranged if it was more convenient for the claimant.

There was an interview room that was wide enough for a wheelchair and another did not have a dividing screen to reduce anxiety of claimants.

Appointments were arranged in conjunction with bus times to assist the applicants.

Some officers went to claimants homes who were not able to visit the office, to help them complete the forms and to scan all the relevant documents at their home. CAB also assisted by completing the claimant's forms.

Providing documentation such as bank books and proof of income was essential unless the claimant was in receipt of Pension Credits (savings or guaranteed)

Members were shown the main claim form, second adult rebate form and change of address form.

Claimants who already received Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit, needed to complete a change of address form if they moved. If their circumstances changed as a result, they would then need to inform the benefits section who would request confirmation of the change in circumstances.

Second Adult Rebate helped those who would had received a Council Tax discount if a second adult was not living in the property. The benefits section only required the income details of the second adult, not the claimant. If the second adult received over £204 per week, they were not entitled to claim.

A web calculator and a ready reckoner assisted claimants to work out the approximate amount of benefit for which the claimant would be entitled.

Claimants had to occupy the premises they were claiming for, however if the claimant went into a care home on a trial period the Benefits Section would continue to pay benefits for up to 13 weeks.

Under approved circumstances, benefits would be paid for two properties for the maximum of 4 weeks.

Housing Benefits could be backdated if supported by a valid reason and was approved by the Benefits Section.

Members enquired what publicity they had undertaken and were advised that they had worked directly with the pension service and had written out to all individuals receiving pension credit, informing them that they could submit a claim for Housing/Council Tax benefit. They also sent letters to all those who were claiming benefits but not pension credit.

They had gone to the papers previously but it had not had the desired effect.

They had also put an advert in Stockton News but did not have much success.

Members advised that many Ward Councillors sent out newsletters to the residents in their ward and suggested that the benefits section could e-mail a paragraph to all Ward Councillors asking them to include it in their newsletters.

The Officers were advised that they could hold a stall at the elderly person's event 'Are you being served?' which would be held at the end of October 2006.

Members observed that when they had tried to phone the benefits section, they had not been able to get through. Members were advised that the service had now been improved and was now manned by more people.

A Member requested that the tone, wording and timing of letters sent out were changed as some of the letters caused distress, especially when they were received on the weekend when the claimant could not contact the section which caused a great deal of stress and anxiety to the claimant.

An Officer advised that the letters currently used had been as a result of a national review. The wording had been provided to them as an ideal however, they would be reviewing and changing the wording and phrasing. They would be seeking input from CAB and other groups.

The Officer advised that they would look into the timing of sending out letters. If legally and technically they could change the timing they would and they would report the situation to Mrs Harrison (Democratic Service Officer) who would inform the Forum.

Sometimes letter were hand delivered so the person could speak to an Officer straight away.

CONCLUDED that:

1. The presentation be noted.
2. A representative of the benefits section would draft a paragraph informing people of relevant information regarding Housing and Council Tax Benefits and e-mail it to all Ward Councillors requesting that they include it in their newsletters which are sent to all the households in their wards.
3. Upon investigation, the Benefits Officer will inform Mrs Harrison (Democratic Services Officer) on their findings and alterations regarding the wording, phrasing and timing of letters.

3 Work Programme

Members were advised that the previous work programme was close to being completed and therefore members were invited to identify items they wanted to put on the new work programme, which would then be scheduled into the allocated dates of the meetings on approval from the Chair and relevant Officers.

CONCLUDED that the following items will be on the new work programme and scheduled into the allocated dates of the meetings on approval from the Chairman and relevant Officers:

- Pensions Department ~ Heating Allowance/Payments ~ Officer to be confirmed.
- Parish Church (future plans)~ Fiona Short.
- Theatre/Entertainment ~ Kevin Parker (Arc).

