

Melville Housing Association



Policy : Welfare Benefits Advice Service

Subject: Welfare Benefits Advice Service

Section: Housing Services

Objective: To provide a free and independent Welfare Benefits Advice Service to our tenants and members of their household.

Scottish Social Housing Charter Outcome 11: Tenancy Sustainment

Issue Date: Nov 2019

Review Date: Nov 2021

Policy Ref No: HSG 003

1 Policy

1.1 Our policy is to provide a free and independent Welfare Benefits Advice service to our tenants and their household members. Only these people will be considered as clients of the advice service and will be identified through a number of routes:

- By direct application through visits to the office, by phone or by writing.
- By referral by staff or through partner agencies who provide services directly to us.
- By referral by other agencies normally by letter or phone.
- By promotion of the service.

1.2 This service also provides information, advice and training on welfare benefits to our Board and staff.

1.3 The service will promote issues on financial, digital and social inclusion to tenants and staff.

2.0 Policy Aims

We aim to:

- provide an advice service that complies with our Scottish National standards accreditation.
- provide good quality information and advice on a range of Welfare Benefits.
- keep up to date with Welfare Benefit reforms, and inform tenants, staff and the Board of the implications.
- mitigate the effect of the reforms on tenants as much as possible through provision of advice.
- contribute to consultation exercises on reforms to inform policy development
- refer cases to our partner agencies or local advice services as appropriate.
- provide advice to clients for formal appeal hearings on a range of benefits.
- liaise with other advice providers, and agencies working on financial, digital and social inclusion
- provide practical assistance, for example, with completion of benefit forms or assisting with writing letters to official bodies.
- advise the Board and staff of Welfare Benefits legislation and implications of any changes to these Regulations.
- advise and train staff on Welfare Benefit issues.
- liaise with and hold regular meetings with Midlothian Council staff and DWP staff.
- provide training to other agencies on Welfare Benefits legislation, , as requested, and if suitable.
- Provide information on local services which are addressing issues of social, digital and financial inclusion.
- Help people reduce their dependency on Welfare Benefits and take personal responsibility for future applications and maintenance of Welfare Benefits claims, where possible.
- Liaise with Housing Officers to improve tenancy sustainment
- Offer Benefits advice and ensure Melville meets its legal requirements in cases of pre court actions.

3.0 The Service

- 3.1 Clients who contact us, or who are referred for advice will be interviewed privately either in the office or at home. This will normally be done within 10 working days from the initial contact or referral. Clients will be contacted by letter, phone, text or email. If the tenant does not respond to a variety of methods of contact the case will be closed. It can be reopened if subsequent contact is made. Referrals are dealt with in accordance with the Procedure HSG105 Welfare Benefits Referrals.
- 3.2 The client's personal circumstances will be assessed to make sure that all Welfare Benefits available are either being claimed, or that the client is aware of potential entitlement. Benefit forms will be given to the client for completion or will be completed with the client if required.
- 3.3 The Welfare Benefits Adviser will explain general rules about relevant benefits as part of the interview. Specific problems will be addressed and practical aid will be provided such as supplying information or advocacy. This can involve writing letters on the clients' behalf.
- 3.4 Where necessary the Welfare Benefits Adviser will advise the client on Benefit Appeals Hearings. The Welfare Benefits Adviser will refer any appeal cases to a specialist agency where there is a lack of expertise to adequately represent the client, or when the adviser is unable to attend.
- 3.5 When the Welfare Benefits Advice Service cannot meet the needs of the client, or the service required is outwith the service remit, the client will be referred to other appropriate organisations. The Welfare Benefits Adviser will refer the client by either providing general information about the agency or by making a telephone or written referral to the agency. This will depend on each individual case. Similarly if there is a conflict of interest, the case should be referred to another appropriate agency. Conflict of interest guidance is provided in the procedure HSGP017 Welfare Benefits Conflict of Interest. The service will be withdrawn if at any time the client wants the adviser to become complicit in any fraud.
- 3.6 The Welfare Benefits Adviser will agree responsibility for action with the client in all cases. This will make sure that both parties are clear on any further action to be taken. Case management is carried out in accordance with the Procedure HSGP 003 Welfare Benefits Case Management Procedure
- 3.7 During absences of the Welfare Benefits Adviser other staff should advise potential customers of the expected time of the absence, and provide details of alternative services. Guidance is available in the Procedure HSGP106 Absence and Service Provision.

4.0 Reporting

- 4.1 The Housing Manager will receive a quarterly progress report of current cases.
- 4.2 The Board will receive six monthly case analysis reports.
- 4.3 Guidance on reporting is available in the Procedure HSGP017 Statistical Information.

5.0 File Review

- 5.1 Welfare Benefits Advice files will be kept separately from other files, to maintain confidentiality. Welfare Benefits Advisers will review and sign off each others cases on its closure. Regular peer reviews are carried out in accordance with Procedure HSGP 108 Peer Checking.
- 5.2 All records will be maintained in line with our policy on Record Keeping and Report Writing.
- 5.3 The service will be reviewed as part of the National Standards Accreditation process. Client confidentiality will be maintained in accordance with DPR001 Privacy Policy.
- 5.4 Appropriate peer review will be carried out to ensure that a quality service is provided.

6.0 Equality & Diversity

- 6.1 We are committed to Equality and Diversity and will not discriminate in the operation of this policy on the basis of age, gender, gender reassignment, race, colour, ethnic or national origin, religion, marital status, family circumstances, political belief or affiliation, trade union membership, sexual orientation, medical condition or disability. We aim to promote equal opportunities and comply with all current legal requirements relating to equal opportunities.

7.0 Tenancy Sustainment

- 7.1 We are committed to assisting tenants, where possible, to remain in their homes. We recognise the individual needs of tenants and take these into account in all aspects of our service. Where we are unable to offer direct assistance we will signpost tenants to other agencies and services. We have a partnership agreement with CHAI (Community Help and Advice Initiative) to provide Tenancy Support and Money Advice services.

8.0 Review of Policy

- 8.1 The Housing Manager will ensure this policy is reviewed every two years or earlier if there are any changes to legislation. The Senior Management Team have delegated authority to approve minor changes to this policy. Significant changes will be submitted to the Board for approval.