

Benefits Team

Customer Services Policy



0845 129 77 77

High Peak Borough Council

www.highpeak.gov.uk

High Peak Borough Council

Contents

1. Overview
2. Take-up
3. Claim Form
4. Personal Callers
5. Telephone Enquiries
6. Visits
7. Information to Landlords and third parties
8. Persons with special needs
9. Persons from Black and Ethnic Minorities
10. General

High Peak Borough Council

1.1 Overview

1. We are required as the local authorities to calculate entitlement to HB/CTB based on the individual circumstances of each claim. This document defines the policy, strategy and performance targets for the take-up of the schemes and sets out the provisions made by High Peak Borough Council relating to the contact with individual customers and associated third parties.

2. The policy is intended to be used in conjunction with the operational procedures and guidance maintained by the Benefit Service and has been drafted to take into account all current prevailing legislation, corporate policy and best practice.

3. The policy and associated procedures are endorsed by members.

4. The overall aims of the Policy are to:

Provide a customer focused service that supports the needs of the service users;

Maximise take-up of the HB/CTB scheme;

Provide support to those customers that are vulnerable and/or require assistance in making a claim;

Ensure that personal information held by the Council is communicated to those parties with appropriate authorisation;

Ensure that the Council's Equal Opportunities Policy is adhered to.

5. The Service Improvement Plan sets out the timescales for achievement of the targets detailed in this Policy.

6. The following sections of this document detail the specific policy and performance targets relating to the individual elements of the administrative process.

High Peak Borough Council

2.1 Take-up

1. The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act (1992) states that every authority awarding HB:

“... shall take such steps as appear to them appropriate for the purpose of securing that persons who may be entitled to housing benefit from the authority become aware that they may be entitled to it.”

2. The Council will seek to maximise take up of HB/CTB by:

Including within the overall strategy for the administration of the HB/CTB scheme, a commitment to encouraging take-up of the scheme and developing an effective Customer Service provision;

Raising awareness of the scheme through publicity displayed in all public offices and those places, such as Registered Social Landlords (RSL) or Jobcentre Plus offices, where the information will be relevant;

Undertaking periodic reviews aimed at encouraging the take-up of entitlement for specific and potentially underrepresented groups;

Providing a claim form that is clear and simple but meets the required administrative standards;

Providing effective Customer Service arrangements that will advise on the potential eligibility of a claim and provide advice on how to make a successful claim;

Provide a visiting service for those customers who are unable to attend the office;

Providing advice and information in alternative media formats as determined by local requirements or on request;

Offering advice relating to the potential eligibility to other benefits;

Providing advice to representative groups, such as RSL's and CAB, relating to the scheme and the Council's policy relating to its administration;

Include details on how to claim to all local authority tenants on take up of their tenancy;

Include details on how to claim with Council Tax correspondence.

3. The Council will provide, monitor and display leaflets relating to the HB/CTB scheme within the reception areas. In particular the leaflets will relate to:

A Guide for Landlords

Working Age Claimants

Pensioners

Temporary Absence from Home

Housing Benefit Payment on Two Homes

If you think the decision about your Housing and Council Tax Benefit is wrong

Backdated Benefits

Discretionary Housing Payment

Overpayments

High Peak Borough Council

3.1 Claim Form.

1. The Council reserves the right to refuse to provide a form where there is a reasonable suspicion that the form is intended to be used for fraudulent purposes.

2. The Council will ensure that the claim form:

Requests all information required to determine correct entitlement;

Provides information relating to the documentation required to be provided in support of the claim to the standards of the Verification Framework guidance;

Contains an appropriately worded declaration aimed at preventing fraudulent claims and the ability to share information with appropriate agencies where appropriate;

3. In order to maximise take-up of the scheme, the Council will make the claim form available;

At all Council offices and/or Customer Service points where public access is granted;

At the offices of RSL's where an arrangement has been made relating to the secure storage and distribution of forms;

At the local advice offices where an arrangement has been made relating to the secure storage and distribution of forms;

By telephone request;

4. Where a request is made for a claim form to be sent by post, the form will be posted within 24 hours of the request being made.

5. All claim forms will be date stamped, with the date of receipt at the designated office, on receipt.

6. The Council will provide clarification and advice, from appropriately trained staff, relating to the completion of the claim form;

At the specified HB/CTB Customer Services office;

By telephone;

By home visit (where appropriate)

By written correspondence;

High Peak Borough Council

4.1 Personal Callers

1. The Council will provide a facility for personal callers to make or enquire about their claim at Buxton Town Hall and Glossop Municipal Buildings.
2. The Council will ensure that the facility is provided within a safe and secure environment for both staff and customers. Members of staff are expected to perform their duties in a polite and professional manner.
3. Provisions will be made for abusive and/or potential violent customers to be excluded from the facility.
4. The facility will be made available during the following periods:

Monday to Friday 9.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.

5. The facility will be staffed by appropriately trained staff who:

Can provide assistance and advice on making a claim, completing the claim form and/or potential entitlement to benefit;

Have immediate access to the relevant claim information and file;

Are able to provide an accurate and clear response to all enquiries relating to the HB/CTB scheme;

Are able to verify documentation provided in support of the claim to the required standard;

Are able to provide advice relating to overpayments and recovery action;

Are able to provide advice relating to the effect, or potential effect, of a change of circumstances;

Are able to provide advice relating to other benefits.

6. On attending the personal caller facility, each caller will:

Be seen by an officer able to respond to basic enquires within 10 minutes of their arrival;

Be seen by an officer able to respond to detailed enquires within 15 minutes of their arrival;

Be provided with the facility for an interview to be conducted in a private interviewing room;

Be provided with a receipt detailing the issues discussed during the interview, the information/documentation that has been provided and any information/documentation that has been requested.

7. Where a request for an appointment is received by any media:

A response detailing the date, time and location will be sent to the customer within 48 hours of the request;

The appointment will be for a date of not more than 14 calendar days from the date of the request;

On attendance, the customer will be seen within 15 minutes of their appointment time by an officer able to deal with their enquiry.

8. Details of all interviews will be recorded by the appropriate method.

High Peak Borough Council

5.1 Telephone Enquiries

1. The Council will provide a facility for enquiries to be made via the telephone.

2. The facility will be made available during the following periods:

Monday to Friday : 8.00a.m. to 8.00 p.m.

3. The facility will be staffed by appropriately trained staff who:

Perform their duties in a polite and professional manner;

Have immediate access to the relevant claim information and file;

Can provide assistance and advice on making a claim, completing the claim form and/or potential entitlement to benefit;

Are able to provide an accurate and clear response to all enquiries relating to the HB/CTB scheme;

Are able to provide advice relating to overpayments and recovery action;

Are able to provide advice relating to the effect, or potential effect, of a change of circumstances;

Are able to provide advice relating to other benefits.

4. On contacting the HB/CTB service each call will be answered, by an appropriately trained member of staff, within 15 seconds.

5. Where a full response cannot be provided at the time of the call, the customer will be advised that they will be called back within 24 hours, or at a time arranged as convenient, with a full response.

6. Where a caller is abusive and/or threatening they will be advised that the call will be terminated if the behaviour persists. Details of all such occurrences will be recorded and the appropriate line manager advised.

7. Details of all calls will be recorded by the appropriate method.

High Peak Borough Council

6.1 Visits

1. The Council will provide a home visiting service to provide assistance to those customers who are unable to attend the office.

2. Visits will be carried out by nominated officers who are sufficiently trained to carry out the duties required of them relating to housing benefits and who are

Able to provide assistance and advice on completing the claim form;

Trained to give advice on the potential for entitlement to benefit;

Capable of providing an accurate and clear response to all enquiries relating to the HB/CTB scheme;

Trained to verify documentation provided in support of the claim to the required standard;

Able to provide advice relating to overpayments and recovery action;

Capable of providing advice relating to the effect, or potential effect, of a change of circumstances;

Are able to provide advice relating to other benefits:

3. Requests for a visit will be accepted in any format. On receipt of a request that is deemed appropriate, notification of the visit will be made within 48 hours of the receipt of the request.

4. The notification of the visit will contain:

Date and time of the visit;

Name of the visiting officer;

Details of any documentation and/or information that will be required during the visit;

5. The nominated visiting officers will produce official identification at the outset of the visit.

6. Visiting officers will adhere to the safety procedures as determined by the Benefit Manager.

7. Visits will be conducted by more than one officer where it is considered that a threat to safety exists.

8. Where a visit conducted at the designated date and time is unsuccessful, the customer will be notified within 24 hours of the fact and requested to contact the benefit office.

High Peak Borough Council

1.1 Information to Landlords and third parties

1. The information collected and retained as part of the administration of the HB/CTB scheme is confidential and is subject to total confidentiality and Data Protection legislation.

2. We will ensure that personal information held by the Council will be held securely with the appropriate access restrictions.

3. Upon receipt of an enquiry relating to data held, we will take the appropriate steps to ensure that the person making the enquiry has the appropriate authority to access the information.

4. Where the enquiry is made on behalf of the person making the claim, written authorisation should be obtained from the claimant, prior to any information being disclosed, detailing:

The details of the person to whom authority to discuss the claim has been granted;

Any restrictions relating to the nature of the information that can be discussed.

5. The written authorisation will be maintained on the claim file and the appropriate system annotation made to enable members of staff dealing with enquiries to establish who information may be disclosed to.

6. Enquiries received from landlords will be subject to the same provisions with the exception of enquiries relating to payments of benefit that have been made directly to the landlord.

7. In such circumstances, information relating to the payment, or overpayment, may be discussed with the landlord but this will not extend to the disclosure, either directly or indirectly, of personal information relating to the claimant.

8. Where there is any concern to whether or not authorisation to discuss the claim has been provided, or whether the person making the enquiry is who they claim to be, the person making the claim will be contacted for clarification prior to any information being provided.

High Peak Borough Council

8.1 Persons with special needs

1. We are committed to providing a HB/CTB provision that addresses the needs of people with special requirements that arise from a physical or mental disability or age related illnesses.

2. We will offer such facilities as are appropriate to enable access to the service in such a way that people with special needs are not disadvantaged in any way.

3. In addition making arrangements to visit people in their home our Service will:

Seek to establish the specific needs of all persons within the authority relating to the provision of the HB/CTB service;

Provide personal enquiry facilities that are accessible and suitable for all persons with disabilities;

Provide claim and general information in alternative and suitable media, such as large print, Braille etc, as determined by documented assessments of specific requirements or on request;

Provide facilities for people with speech or hearing difficulties including the ability to arrange an interview using British Sign Language;

Consult representative groups regarding the facilities that are provided.

High Peak Borough Council

9.1 Persons from Black and Ethnic Minorities

1. The Service is committed to providing service that meets the needs of all persons within the community regardless of race or culture In support of the Council's Equal Opportunities Statement

2. In particular we will

Seek to establish the specific needs of all sectors of the community within the authority relating to the provision of the HB/CTB service;

Provide claim and general information in key ethnic minority languages as determined by documented assessments of specific requirements or on request;

Provide a translation/interpreting service on request;

Consult representative groups regarding the facilities that are provided.

High Peak Borough Council

10.1 General

1. High Peak Borough Council is committed to providing a HB/CTB service that reflects the needs of its customers. In addition to the policies and targets set out in this document, we will:

Conduct Customer and Stakeholder Surveys, on an annual basis, in order to establish the opinions and requirements of our customers;

Consistently aim for National Indicators upper quartile in all that we do

Set and monitor targets for continuous improvement and provide annual reports on performance to Members

Engage with customers through a Citizen's Panel