



Benefit take-up Strategy 2010/11



Introduction

Wigan Council Benefits Service recognises that it has a key role in maximising benefit take up across the borough and will play its part in helping the council achieving its vision of “Building the future together – a place where people matter and you can afford to live the life you want” and the key priorities that have been identified – these are based on what people have said about their future aspirations

- **Ambitious Communities**
- **Realising Aspirations,**
- **Strong Community,**
- **Living Healthier and Longer.**

Background and profile of the Borough

Ambitious Communities

Opportunities exist that allow people to fulfil their ambitions within a local economy that provides ease of access to jobs and services. People will have increased income levels and will be able to access better quality, affordable homes in safe neighbourhoods.

Our communities will look to the future and protect our environment for future generations

Understanding our priority

Wigan has a **low skilled based** economy, offering low paid wages, and of those residents who stay, some continue to be low skilled, with expectations remaining static.

Generally speaking people don't travel out of the borough; so experience and culture remain the same as years ago, with families often passing their expectation on through generations. **Housing affordability** is an issue for many people, especially people on low incomes (wages are £30 week lower than the regional average), and Wigan is the 7th highest for **homelessness** in England.

Currently in Wigan only 14% of people **use public transport** (bus or train) and **Climate change** still remains an issue and will affect everything we do and the choices we make.

Realising Aspirations

The people of the borough have raised aspirations for what they as individuals can achieve, particularly young people and people from disadvantaged communities.

People of all ages are equipped with the right life skills and the qualifications employers need to achieve their ambitions and which enable them to participate

Understanding our priority

In Wigan the **teenage pregnancy** rate is higher than regional and national averages. Although the results our children attain in school are good and compare well, our needs assessment tells us they are not so good in some of our most deprived areas. Aspiration is low and achievement is not perceived as a challenge.

We have a high number of children 'looked after' by the council, and although attainment results have improved, we still feel it's a priority for us to ensure we give these children the **best possible chance** in life to achieve.

There are **low levels of skills and qualifications** among Wigan residents; less than two thirds of Wigan's working age population are qualified to level 2 (lower than national and regional average). Less than 1 in 5 people are qualified to Level 4 or above. The **GCSE attainment** in the top 3% disadvantage neighbourhoods is only 38% compared to a borough average of 61% and people living in less deprived areas are less likely to enter higher education.

Strong Communities

Communities are at the heart of all we do, where people support and care for the wellbeing of others and the future.

A community with a strong sense of what it is capable of achieving and where there are opportunities to get involved, particularly for young people, in shaping the future.

Understanding our priority

Wigan is large and each of the 10 townships are different. This means that we need to take account of the **needs of differing neighbourhoods**.

The population of Wigan is changing, and we recognise our role in helping to create a community where people **get along together**. Some people in Wigan do feel that people from different backgrounds get on well, but this could be better.

Our communities tell us that, some parts of the borough are now cleaner but lots of people are still dissatisfied with the **amount of litter** in many areas.

The provision of new leisure facilities—such as the new pool and gym at Leigh sports village are encouraging more people to take regular exercise, but the latest Place Survey results tell us that people are **less satisfied with parks and open space** than they used to be. **Alcohol misuse** is a big issue in Wigan. It leads to high demand on local health services, and high **levels of crime and antisocial behaviour**.

Living healthier and longer

Providing opportunities that help support people to make choices that improve quality of life and enable people to live longer particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Understanding our priority

Wigan is an **ageing borough**; by 2015 there will be 5,300 more women and 6,000 more men in Wigan aged over 65 than in 2008, with a significantly higher increase of 700 people in the over 85 group. It is this group of people, as well as people with learning disabilities who are now living into their old age, which are likely to require **more intense service provision** in the future and will pose the greatest challenge.

In contrast, **Life expectancy** in Wigan is still 2 years below the England Average for men and women. A major problem in the borough is **health inequality** in regards to deprivation, gender and ethnicity. For example, men in the least deprived areas live around eight years longer than those in the most deprived areas, and for women the difference is over five years. The biggest **causes of shortened life expectancy** in Wigan are coronary heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and respiratory disease.

Current households in Wigan receiving Benefit

The caseload has risen from 30356 to 34343 in the 18 month period from June 2008 to December 2009.

Aims and objectives

We have identified several key themes and developed an action plan to identify what we are doing and want to do to in each area.

- to tackle worklessness
- to tackle homelessness
- to tackle child poverty
- to tackle pensioner poverty
- to maximise income for all
- get it right first time
- to ensure that benefits services are accessible to all

To help to target resources effectively we will be improving our access to information about the demographic profiling of Wigan using our benefits and CRM data to build on existing information on the Councils WISDOM database.

This information will be analysed and the action plan revised to reflect this information.

Wigan Council Benefits Take Up Action plan 2010/11				
Objective – to tackle worklessness				
	Action	Outcomes	Frequency	By Who?
	In and out of work scheme went live December 2009	Maximises benefit entitlement at first point of contact. Removes barriers to work and improves access to a range of benefits. Increasing employment levels	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	Paul Wadsworth
	Provide benefit calculations over the phone – assessing the likely impact of entering work and signposting to other in work benefits	Allow customers to make informed decisions about moving into work or changing jobs	Ongoing	Gareth Davies
	Provide a benefit calculator on the website for self service calculations	Allow customers to make informed decisions about moving into work or changing jobs	Ongoing	Gareth Davies
	Provide extended access to the service from 8am to 6pm during the week and 8am to 12.30am on Saturdays	Enables customers to contact outside of normal office hours	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	Paul Wadsworth
	Improve liaison arrangements with Job centre Plus and the Processing Centres	React to trends in Job Centre Plus workloads. Look for opportunities for local joint take up activities.	Quarterly meetings	Donna Barrow Jones
	Look at ways of promoting further Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit as an in work benefit	Through publicity campaigns and identifying new marketing and liaison opportunities for example Sure Start	Throughout 2010/11	Gareth Davies
	Advertise benefit take up on Council payslips for employees and the wider community	May pay slips – increase in take up amongst Wigan residents – measurable through increased contact received	May 2010	Gareth Davies
Objective - to tackle homelessness				

Working with partners such as Wigan and Leigh Housing, Citizens Advice Bureau , Housing Associations and Wigan Housing Solutions	Monitoring rent arrears, assisting tenants to pay their rent, preventing eviction	Quarterly	Lesley O'Halloran, Donna Barrow Jones, Janice Chesworth
Ensure that our allocation of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are distributed fully	Fair distribution of the DHP grant. Member's agreement to pay up to the overall limit. Enables tenants to maintain their tenancy or look for suitable alternative accommodation.	Throughout 2010/11	Donna Barrow Jones
Landlord liaison – Private sector and with Wigan and Leigh Housing	Preventing eviction. Publicising Local Housing Allowance rates. Prevents landlords from leaving the market. Targets vulnerable groups to ensure benefits are accessed	Monthly	Janice Chesworth and Lesley Marriott
Work with Housing Strategy to reduce homelessness	Links into the council wide housing strategy, wider issues. Measurable outcomes on preventing homelessness.	Weekly	Donna Barrow Jones
Work with the Local Housing Allowance Safeguards Policy	Ensures benefit is used for its intended purpose, protecting vulnerable tenants. Prevents landlords from leaving the market.	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	Lesley Marriott
Objective - to tackle child poverty			
Promote access to free school meals	Continue to provide a joined up approach to claiming Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit through a single application form. Promote the take up of free school meals across the borough through a variety of media	Weekly	Gareth Davies
Maximise income levels and access into work for families with children	Use Customer Insight findings from the Greater Manchester Customers Services Group initiative to target resources	Ongoing	Lesley O'Halloran
Objective - to tackle pensioner poverty			
Have a dedicated member of staff working with the	Increased take up of linked benefits through	Weekly	Ruth Finney

	local Pension Service to access all available benefits and services	visits to identified customer		
	Joint take up initiatives with partners – including the Pension Service and Age Concern	Participation with the Benefits Service on the Mobile Advice Centre. New initiatives identified through the Debt and Advice group	Bi monthly	Gareth Davies
	Participate in the “Tell us once” initiative	Increased access to a range of services from the initial contact. Removing customer confusion and avoidable contact		Lesley O’Halloran
	Facilitate the Debt and Advice Meetings	Held quarterly – joint initiatives – joint sharing of take up good practice	Quarterly	Lesley O’Halloran
Objective - to maximise income for all				
	Signpost customers accessing Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit to other benefits where a potential entitlement is established	Increased take up of other welfare benefits - measurable	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	All benefits staff
	Job roles changed within customer services to incorporate a requirement to maximise benefit take up	Job descriptions changed and training carried out for front line staff	April 2010	Lesley O’Halloran
	Aim to resolve 80% of enquiries at the first point of contact	Dedicated benefits specialists at the first point of contact for customers. Resolution rates of 80% or above	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	Lesley O’Halloran
	Increase knowledge of our customer and potential customer base and making direct contact with customers	Ensuring customers get entitlement to a full range of benefits and a quicker service delivery Improving customer satisfaction levels	Ongoing	
	Ensure customers are aware of what information they need to supply to support their claim	Improved clarity of information provided for the customer. Promote direct contact by phone with customers to follow up claims where information is not available	Now part of the service delivery for benefits	All Benefits Staff
Objective – to ensure that benefits services are accessible to all				
	Ensure that customers can access the service through their preferred channel	Widen access through self service, assisted claims at access points	Monthly – part of the Service	Paul Wadsworth

			Improvement Plan	
	Provide support services or equipment to assist with disabilities or interpretation services where English is not their first language	Home visits provided, provided loop systems for the hard of hearing, access to communication support	Weekly	Lesley O'Halloran
	Look to target resources into areas of need	Developing links with organisations and new partners to improve access to and take up of benefits	Ongoing	Gareth Davies, Lesley O'Halloran, Donna Barrow Jones, Paul Wadsworth

The strategy and action plan as a whole will be reviewed annually but revised and updated throughout the year as initiatives and new data develops