

Landlord Update November 2009

As part of the Isle of Wight Council's Benefits Service continued liaison with Landlords, this update is to provide you with the latest news surrounding recent changes introduced by Central Government to the Housing and Council Tax Benefit schemes. This update is also intended to provide you with information on our current service delivery and other points of interest.

Recent changes to Housing and Council Tax Benefit

Important changes have recently been introduced that affect both families and pensioners claiming Housing and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB).

From the beginning of November, Child Benefit will no longer be counted as income when an assessment is made for HB/CTB. This means there will be a significant increase in the number of people who may qualify for these benefits.

For pensioners claiming HB/CTB, we will now disregard the first £10,000 of their capital before we calculate how much benefit they are entitled to. Previously the amount of capital was £6,000.

Existing claimants in receipt of HB/CTB will have their claims automatically adjusted from 2 November to disregard the Child Benefit income and pensioner capital disregard changes. If you as a Landlord are aware of a tenant that is not already getting help towards their rent or council tax, you may want to encourage them to check the council's online benefits calculator at: www.iwight.com to see if they might qualify. Alternatively they can ring 01983 823950 to discuss making a claim.

From the end of October the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP), Her Majesties Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Isle of Wight Councils Benefit Service, have introduced the "In and Out of Work" project here on the Island, which is available to certain customers who are moving into and out of employment.

The project adopts a 'tell us once' philosophy by gathering customer information and evidence through the Job Centre Plus and sharing it with HMRC Tax Credit Office and the Local Authority Benefit Service. The key aim is to offer more effective access to In and Out of work benefits and services provided to customers who move in and out of work.

Landlords may be asked to complete a declaration form as evidence of rent being charged to a claimant. This form should be returned directly to the Local Authorities Benefit Service to consider any Housing Benefit. This web link provides a summary of the project: www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/in-out-work-project.pdf

Local Housing Allowance latest

The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are published every month on our website. There have clearly been some changes to the current levels of LHA being determined for the Island by the Rent Service (now part of the Valuation Office Agency). The November LHA rates are listed over the page for your information.

The Government is currently considering a change to the £15 top up that is available to claimants who pay a rent that is less than the level of LHA applicable to their household. The intention is that this top up will be withdrawn from April 2010, should it be passed as law. Existing claimants receiving the top up are likely to continue to receive the top up payments until they either; reach their LHA anniversary date, change address or have a break in their claim.

Category Room Need LHA Rate Applicable

A	Shared room rate	weekly: £ 67.00 monthly: £ 290.33
B	1 Bedroom	weekly: £ 98.08 monthly: £ 425.01
C	2 Bedroom	weekly: £ 126.92 monthly: £ 549.99
D	3 Bedroom	weekly: £ 150.00 monthly: £ 650.00
E	4 Bedroom	weekly: £ 196.15 monthly: £ 849.98
F	5 Bedroom	weekly: £ 225.00 monthly: £ 975.00

The Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme: is designed to help people who, because of special circumstances need financial assistance with their rent and or Council Tax. This is an additional payment where HB/CTB entitlement does not cover the full value of the rent or council tax. Payments are entirely discretionary and are for a limited period only. Please refer claimants to the Benefits Service web pages on www.iwight.com for further information.

New HB/CTB Benefit Application form

You may have noticed that the HB/CTB application form used by the Isle of Council has recently changed. The form was developed in conjunction with various representatives from agencies across the Island. These included Welfare Agencies, Housing Associations, a Local Pension Service Representative, Housing colleagues and the Chairman of the Private Landlord Forum for the Island.

This was not an easy task because there is so much information that has to be included in any benefit application form. However, we have tried to make the form as user friendly as possible for all concerned. The Benefit Service is very grateful for the valuable comments and assistance provided by these representatives in developing this form for the Island Residents.

Performance

Our local targets for 2009/10 has been to process all new claims on average within 20 days, change of circumstances within 9.5 days and our National Indicator 181 (Right Time) target has been to process all new claims and change events within 13.5 days. Our reported performance is as follows:

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Year to date average
New Claims : end to end processing (days)	14.12	12.39	15.81	17.48	16.58
Changes in circumstances (days)	7.64	7.59	8.82	8.76	7.77
National Indicator 181 (Right Time)	9.59	8.99	11.18	11.40	10.52

When you consider our processing days only four years ago were on average 34.46 days for new claims and 13.26 days for changes in circumstances, the service has made great strides in reducing our processing times to improve on our performance. That is not to say there is no room for further improvements within the service, as we continue to strive towards improved service delivery during a very testing and demanding economic downturn.

The Benefits service is experiencing significant increases in the number of new applications being received compared to previous years. Performance over the last few months has been very good against our targets. With the changes previously mentioned within this update, in addition to the continued Economic pressure being experienced, there is likely to be further increases in the demand for benefits. The Benefit Service will endeavour to meet the service delivery targets that have been set.

Payments and postal strike issues

You may recently have experienced delays in receiving Housing Benefit cheques in respect of some of your tenants due to postal strike disruptions. I would urge anyone who is receiving cheque payments to consider having your payments made directly into your bank account (please note Share Saver accounts cannot be used for this method of payment).

Switching to Bacs payments also means that you can use these funds immediately. No more waiting for cheques to clear. If you wish to take advantage of this method of payment, please contact the office on 01983 823950 to discuss what information is required from you to have your payments set up by Bacs.

Christmas arrangements

The Christmas payment arrangements are being scheduled as follows:

The scheduled Landlord cheque four weekly in arrears payments – due to be dispatched 10 December & 7 January. **These dates have not been changed.**

The scheduled Landlord Bacs four weekly in arrears payments – due to be cleared in your bank accounts 14 December and 11 January. **There is no change to these dates.**

The claimant scheduled cheque two weekly in arrears payments have had to be adjusted slightly – Payments due to cover the period up to 27 December will now be dispatched on 22 December instead of the 24 December by second class post.

The claimant scheduled Bacs two weekly in arrears payments – due to be cleared in their bank accounts on 28 December will instead be in their bank accounts on 29 December (due to the Bank Holiday).

The scheduled Cheques and Bacs payments due to be received on 11 January will be as normal.

The scheduled two weekly in advance payments have had to be adjusted slightly – Cheque payments due to cover the period up to 17 January will now be dispatched 24 December instead of 30 December. The Bacs two weekly in advance payments will remain as being paid into bank accounts on 4 January as normal.

All postal cheque payments will be sent by second class post as per normal.

The Council Offices will close at 3pm on Thursday 24 December and will be open again 8.30 am on 4 January. Please refer to the Councils website or the press for further information nearer the time.

Forthcoming Events

Isle of Wight Landlords' Fair

25 November 2009 at 6pm

Compass Room, Gurnard Pines, Cowes

This event is an opportunity for Island Landlords to discuss and hear the latest information in relation to Housing matters. For more information and to reserve places, please telephone (01983) 823040 and ask to speak to Jem Seaward or email: housing@iow.gov.uk

Finally

This update is also available on our website at: www.iwight.com within the Local Housing Allowance Section, Information for Landlords. If you have any suggestions for future content you would like included in this update, please email the service at housing.benefit@iow.gov.uk. Please ensure you put a subject heading 'Landlord News Letter Item' in your email.