

Liberal Democrat Motion

Council 17 July 2024

Unclaimed Benefits Motion

Council notes that:

- A. Policy in Practice's *Missing Out 2024* report revealed that £22.7 billion of benefit support was unclaimed in the UK in the last financial year, meaning 8.4 million people are missing out on an average of £2,700 per year.
- B. More than £5 billion of unclaimed benefits are administered by local authorities, including £3.4 billion in unclaimed Council Tax Support.
- C. In Merton, benefit payments totaling £118 million were unclaimed in 2023/24, including an estimated £20 million of Universal Credit, £8 million in Pension Credit, and £4.5 million in Carer's Allowance.
- D. Receiving means-tested benefits (e.g., Universal Credit, Pension Credit) also unlocks so-called 'passport benefits' (e.g., Social Broadband Tariffs, Free School Meals).
- E. 90 percent of Merton residents eligible for Social Broadband Tariffs are not claiming their discounts, which would be worth £4 million across the Borough, according to Policy in Practice.
- F. London Borough of Merton has not undertaken any assessment of unclaimed benefits in the borough.

Council believes that:

- G. Merton residents may not claim benefits they are entitled to because (1) they do not realise they are eligible, (2) application processes can be complex, (3) they associate a social stigma with receiving benefits.
- H. Receiving benefits can be life-changing for residents who are struggling financially, particularly during this cost-of-living crisis.

- I. London Borough of Merton has a responsibility to alert every household in Merton about the benefits they are entitled to and how to claim them.
- J. Benefits uptake campaigns have proven to be extremely successful. The Greater London Authority's Pension Credit Campaign helped 2,165 Londoners to claim an additional £3,879 on average and achieved a £98 return for every £1 invested.

Council requests that Cabinet considers:

- K. Working with Policy in Practice, Age UK, and other organisations to replicate the data-led campaigns run by the Greater London Authority and other local councils to maximise the uptake of unclaimed means-tested and passported benefits.
- L. Producing a Benefits Boost Strategy which makes use of existing resources to increase benefits uptake, including:
 - a. a front-page promotion in *InMerton*, the Council's quarterly magazine distributed free to 80,000 households across the Borough;
 - b. notices in newsletters across school and care homes;
 - c. council-owned advertising spaces and social media accounts.
- M. Using the cost-of-living fund to invest in (1) an in-built Benefits Calculator on the Council's website; (2) access to the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Dashboard from Policy in Practice.
- N. Preparing an Annual Report on the financial impact of the Benefits Boost Strategy on local residents and Merton Council.

Councillor Anthony Fairclough

Councillor John Oliver

Councillor Jenifer Gould