

# **BLOG: 'Make the Call' - Improving Benefit Uptake**

## **As part of the Social Security Agency's Improving Benefit Uptake Programme, the community outreach service is keen to engage with housing associations.**

Last year nearly 5,000 people who [contacted the Benefits Advice helpline](#) received an average of £65 a week additional benefits they were entitled to but didn't know about. That's almost £17m in benefits that would have otherwise gone unclaimed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffAoUpkguJw>

With the upcoming implementation of [welfare reform](#) in Northern Ireland, housing associations can play a key role in supporting those tenants who will be adversely affected by the changes. The Social Security Agency is keen to engage with housing associations to reach tenants who may not be receiving all of the benefits they are entitled to.

The [Benefits Advice helpline](#) is a free and confidential service available to anyone living in Northern Ireland. The Benefit Uptake Programme offers a community outreach service consisting of 19 experienced outreach officers located across Northern Ireland. It provides personal entitlement checks to anyone contacting the helpline and can also assist with application form completion for those who need extra support to help turn that potential entitlement into a benefit claim.

In addition, the community outreach team can attend benefit awareness clinics to deliver talks and information sessions. Attendees at such events can also have a personal benefit entitlement check.

NIFHA has met with the Social Security Agency and together have we identified a number of opportunities for directing tenants towards the services available

through the Benefit Uptake Programme.

## **New Tenancies**

At the initial stages of a tenancy, new tenants could be provided with the contact details for the Benefits Advice helpline. The Benefit Uptake Programme has a wide range of promotional materials from leaflets to torches that could also be included inside tenancy welcome packs.

## **Arrears Management**

This may include sending out quarterly rent statements or making contact regarding an arrear. You can signpost tenants to the [Benefits Advice helpline](#) by including a leaflet available from the Social Security Agency or by adding the Freephone number **(0800 232 1271)** to the bottom of statements and letters.

## **Scheme Visits**

Housing association staff often have regular contact with tenants. By storing the phone number **(0800 232 1271)** for the Benefits Advice helpline in your phone, you are able to provide this at any time should a tenant require it.

These are just a number of practical suggestions in which housing associations can direct tenants towards the services available through the Benefit Uptake Programme. Representatives from the community outreach team will be at the upcoming [Social Housing Practitioners Conference](#) on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016. They are keen to discuss ways in which they can engage with housing associations to ensure tenants are receiving the benefits they are entitled to.

