SPSO decision report

SPSO Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

Case:	**201403008, Renfrewshire Council**
Sector:	local government
Subject:	local housing allowance and council tax benefit
Outcome:	some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C complained about the way the council handled changes to her council tax when she started work and stopped getting employment support allowance. Ms C contacted the council to tell them about the change in her circumstances. She knew that she was no longer entitled to a council tax reduction and wanted the necessary adjustments to be made to her council tax payments, which she made by direct debit.

We found that the council did not act efficiently on the information provided and were responsible for confusion in the administration of Ms C's council tax. The team responsible for council tax reduction had not acted on an electronic notification from the Department of Work and Pensions and when Ms C contacted the council's customer contact centre she was given mixed messages about the process by which changes would be made to her account. Each time Ms C phoned the council she should have been transferred to the benefits service or invited to join the service phone queue in line with the council's agreed call-handling process. There was no evidence that this process was followed. Consequently it took more than 12 months for the council tax reduction to be removed so that the team responsible for council tax could adjust Ms C's account, by which time she had accrued significant arrears.

Ms C also complained that the council unreasonably took a payment from her bank account without prior warning. We did not uphold this complaint because there was no evidence that the council told Ms C when she made an additional payment by phone that the usual amount would not also be taken by direct debit.

Recommendations

We recommended that the council:

- apologise to Ms C for the confusion caused in handling her complaint calls and in responding to her complaint about poor communication; and
- remind staff of the importance of the agreed process for transferring calls or inviting people to join the service queue.