

Time to claim net benefits

[Michael Cross](#) Thu 29 Sep 2005 01.43 BST

Rotherham council is reaping the rewards of allowing residents to apply for benefits electronically

Julie Dean of Rotherham, South Yorkshire, made a piece of e-history last month when she called in at her council to apply for housing benefit. Instead of filling in the usual 25-page paper form, she sat in front of a screen and, with the help of an adviser, answered a short set of questions targeted at her personal circumstances.

After signing the application electronically, it was automatically routed to the council's computers. At the same time, the system checked whether Dean was eligible for 60 other state benefits.

Dean was the first person to try out an e-benefits system developed as part of the e-government programme. The process took one third of the time usually needed to assess a claimant. The program's designers say it will soon be available for people wanting to claim benefits over the web from home.

Until now, benefit claims have been a tardy runner in the e-government race. While in theory 80% of public services are available online (96% will be by December 31), the most developed e-services tend to be those that collect money rather than hand it back. Every council has some facility for paying council tax electronically from your home. Not one allows you to claim council tax benefit online.

There are reasons for these priorities. Claiming benefits demands higher levels of security than paying bills. Councils don't check the identities of people paying parking tickets - if someone starts impersonating offenders, no one is likely to complain. Also, benefits claimants come from sections of society least likely to use computers. Most efforts to promote e-government have been aimed at young professionals.

Priorities are now changing as the final 25% of government services go online. It is already possible to apply online for tax credits at the Inland Revenue's website. Other benefits are due to follow once government has established ways of authenticating citizens' identities electronically.

The driving force behind e-benefits, however, is efficiency. According to Mark Evans of Rotherham metropolitan borough council, 61 separate benefits are available from the state. Some are administered by central government, some by local councils, and each has its own rules and procedures. E-enablement offers a way to simplify the appearance of the system without grappling with difficult reform.

The system piloted at Rotherham was developed by a group of councils and IT firms funded with £7m from central government. The national e-benefits project aimed to develop a software that could be used to check whether a citizen is eligible for any government benefit and to feed applications electronically into back office systems.

So far, the system processes only applications for council tax benefit and housing benefit - administered by local authorities - and just checks eligibility for others. However, even this is a major time-saver, says Evans. "A typical interview process without the system would take 60-90 minutes," says Evans. The first e-enabled assessment took 21 minutes.

Because of the need to check identities and to sign documents, claimants still have to come into the council's customer service centre. There, they sit in front of a swivel screen so they can follow the process as an adviser leads them through. Once completed, the electronic forms are signed with a digital pen.

The system's first user learned that she may be entitled to child benefit, child tax credit, working tax credit, free dental treatment and dentures, fares to hospital, sight tests and glasses. Dean's verdict: "Much easier than the old forms."

Local authorities are equally keen, says Evans. More than 50 authorities

say they want to try the software. Evans says that claiming online at home "will be reality pretty soon".

Another local authority initiative called Government Connect will take care of authentication by providing citizens with a unique login. "There may still be a need for a final verification of documents, but there is no reason why the majority of the application could not be completed on a self-service basis."

For now, the question is what will happen to the software developed under the project when funding runs out. Rotherham and its partners are negotiating terms for taking ownership. How this will work in practice is unresolved: "Rotherham council isn't a software house," Evans admits.

- Tax credits application:

www.taxcredits.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/HomeIR.aspx

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