

AUDIT SCOTLAND RISK ASSESSMENT OF HOUSING BENEFIT

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The final report has been received from Audit Scotland in respect of their risk assessment of Housing Benefit carried out in May 2014.
- 1.2 Audit Scotland has concluded that they are satisfied with the action plan produced in response to their audit report and have concluded that no further scrutiny is required. The report is generally positive about the way in which the Council have delivered the service. It identifies 11 risks to continuous improvement, two of which have been carried forward from the previous audit in July 2011.
- 1.3 These risks include:
- updating the Service Level Agreement (SLA) 2012/13 between the Revenues and Benefits service and the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and the HB Overpayment Recovery / Debt Collection policy 2010/11
 - ensuring that, in appropriate cases, the level of evidence requested by CSC staff at the first point of contact is sufficient to enable the Revenues and Benefits service to process claims without the need to request further information
 - addressing the reasons why the council has failed to meet its financial accuracy target of 95% since 2010/11
 - linking intervention outcomes to the value of overpayment/underpayment identified to determine the effectiveness of its approach, and to help inform future intervention strategies
 - addressing the reasons for the declining trend in the percentage of sanctions arising from completed investigations.
- 1.4 Three of the 11 risks identified have already been addressed. Work on the other 8 risks is scheduled to be completed over the course of the financial year, with the last two being completed by 31 March 2015.
- 1.5 Policy & Resources Committee is asked to note the content of the report (attached in Appendix 2) and the action plan(attached in Appendix 3) for mitigating the risks identified which has been accepted by Audit Scotland.

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Audit Scotland has undertaken a Housing Benefit risk assessment which is part of their national risk assessment programme.
- 2.2 The key objective of the risk assessment is to determine the extent to which the benefit service is meeting its obligations to achieve continuous improvement in all its activities. Specifically, it considers the effectiveness of the benefit service in meeting national and local priorities, business planning and reporting, and delivering outcomes.
- 2.3 The Council has received the final report from Audit Scotland and has submitted an action plan to mitigate the risks that have been identified during the audit. The action plan has been accepted and Audit Scotland has concluded that no further scrutiny is required.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Policy & Resources Committee notes the content of the Audit Scotland Risk Assessment Report on the Council's performance in Housing Benefit administration and the associated action plan.

4.0 DETAIL

- 4.1 A risk assessment was previously carried out on Argyll and Bute Council's benefit service in July 2011 when Audit Scotland identified 17 risks to continuous improvement. These were reported to the Chief Executive in July 2011 and, in response, the council submitted an action plan in August 2011 to address these risks which Audit Scotland accepted as satisfactory, if fully implemented.
- 4.2 In April 2014, the council submitted a current self-assessment along with supporting evidence, and an updated action plan. Of the 17 risks identified, the council has made significant progress:
- 13 actions fully completed
 - 2 actions on-going
 - 2 actions outstanding.
- 4.3 The report states that in completing or partially completing 15 of these risks, the council has made a positive contribution to the delivery of the benefit service in particular by:

- developing clear links between the council's key strategic documents to show how the benefit service contributes to the council's wider corporate, national, and community objectives
- ensuring that performance in respect of the recovery of all debt is accurately reported
- carrying out detailed analysis of appeals and requests for reconsideration to help identify areas for improvement to the delivery of the service
- addressing performance in respect of the number of claims that have been outstanding for more than 50 days from 16% in 2010/11, to 4% at April 2014.

4.4 There are two risks outstanding and two risks where action is ongoing from our previous risk assessment and, in order to ensure continuous improvement, the council needs to address these and the new risks identified. There are 11 risks in total and they include:

- updating key council documents to ensure that they reflect current policy and procedures. These include the Service Level Agreement (SLA) 2012/13 between the Revenues and Benefits service and the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and the HB Overpayment Recovery / Debt Collection policy 2010/11
- ensuring that, in appropriate cases, the level of evidence requested by CSC staff at the first point of contact is sufficient to enable the Revenues and Benefits service to process claims without the need to request further information
- addressing the reasons why the council has failed to meet its financial accuracy target of 95% since 2010/11
- linking intervention outcomes to the value of overpayment/underpayment identified to determine the effectiveness of its approach, and to help inform future intervention strategies
- addressing the reasons for the declining trend in the percentage of sanctions arising from completed investigations.

4.5 Of the 11 risks identified 3 have already been actioned. The proposal is to implement the remainder of the changes between now and the end of the financial year.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 The report provides the Council with assurances that the Benefits Unit continue to deliver an efficient and effective housing benefit administration service.

5.2 There are however 11 risks identified to continuous improvement of which 3 have been addressed since the audit was concluded and the other 8 will be addressed by 31 March 2015.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

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| 6.1 | Policy: | Updated policy for recovery of overpayments to be developed. |
| 6.2 | Financial: | None |
| 6.3 | Legal: | None |
| 6.4 | HR: | None |
| 6.5 | Equalities: | None |
| 6.6 | Risk: | None |
| 6.7 | Customer Service: | Action plan assists continuous improvement in customer service in respect of claiming housing benefit. |

Douglas Hendry
Executive Director of Customer Services
8 August 2014

Policy Lead: Dick Walsh, Council Leader

For further information contact:

Fergus Walker, Revenues and Benefits Manager (01586 555237) or Judy Orr, Head of Customer and Support Services (01586-555280)

APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Audit Scotland letter of 7 August 2014 concluding the audit
- Appendix 2: Final report re Risk Assessment
- Appendix 3: Action plan as submitted