

The Highland Council
Resources Committee – 27 August 2014

Agenda Item	13
Report No	RES/ 41/14

Audit Scotland: Benefits Performance Audit Annual Update 2013/14

Report by Director of Finance

Summary

This Report provides the outcomes of Audit Scotland's Benefits Performance work across Scotland in 2013/14.

1. Background

- 1.1 From April 2013 (when Council Tax Reduction replaced Council Tax Benefit) the Benefits Performance audits by Audit Scotland have covered only Housing Benefit.
- 1.2 As explained in the Report (http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/hb_140620_benefits_performance_audit.pdf) this audit work has two phases – risk assessments and where necessary, focused audits.
- 1.3 The main objective is to help Councils improve their Benefit services and to hold authorities to account for any failing services.

2. 2013/14 Risk Assessment Programme

- 2.1 As previously reported to the Highland Council's Finance, Housing and Resources Committee on 27 November 2013, a local Risk Assessment was carried out during September 2013.
- 2.2 This Report noted that the Council had delivered an improved speed of processing at the same time as maintaining a strong accuracy of performance and continuing to reduce local authority error overpayments. This was achieved despite an increased workload, extended responsibilities and reduced staffing levels. Continuous improvement had been delivered in most areas since the last performance audit in August 2010.
- 2.3 The Council's performance was above the Scottish averages for both new claims and changes of circumstance and compared very well to other Councils.
- 2.4 The Assistant Auditor General in his covering letter also noted that the Council has been proactively participating in Welfare Reform discussions and working groups and has demonstrated success in working collaboratively and implementing change. This put the Council in a strong position to effectively deal with the challenges relating to the introduction of Universal Credit.

3. Thematic Studies

- 3.1 As set out on pages 6 and 7, these studies covered *Claiming Housing Benefit Online*, and a *Review of Recovery of Benefits Subsidy 2012/13*.
- 3.2 A Report on the second theme was presented to the Resources Committee on 28 May 2014, when areas of good practice were reviewed by the Council and these continue to be the subject of improvement actions where appropriate.

4. Areas of Good Practice and Key Areas of Risk

- 4.1 As part of the Council's drive for continuous improvement, the findings from other Councils' assessments are being considered. Good practices are already evident in Highland, such as the controlled manner in which the Finance Service implemented DWP Atlas (Automated Transfer to Local Authorities) notifications, highlighted on page 10 of the Audit Scotland Report.

5. Welfare Reform

- 5.1 Pages 12 and 13 of the Report provide a useful reminder of just how much additional work associated with the seismic welfare changes introduced by the UK Government has been, and will be, devolved to Scottish Councils.
- 5.2 The Council will welcome any assistance that Audit Scotland can give in seeking to have removed from Scottish Councils the considerable uncertainties that persist in terms of the continuing absence of a detailed migration plan for moving customers from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit, and the long term vision and funding for the local support services that authorities are expected to provide.

6. Implications

- 6.1 There are no resource implications arising directly from this Report, although there are considerable resource implications for the Council in delivering Welfare Services. A summary of these is provided separately on this Agenda in the Welfare Reform Update report.
- 6.2 There are no legal; equalities; climate change/Carbon Clever; risk, Gaelic or rural implications.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note the findings from Audit Scotland's Benefits Performance Audits during 2013/14, which included the involvement of the Council in a Risk Assessment study, the results of which have already been reported to Committee; and to welcome the efforts of Audit Scotland in disseminating good practice in this area of work and seeking with the Council to clarify continuing uncertainties about certain aspects of Welfare Reform.

Designation: Director of Finance

Date: 6 August 2014

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Background Papers:

<http://old.highland.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/529294AB-8B49-470B-95E0-A3C284220628/0/Item10RES0814.pdf>

<http://old.highland.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/CBF47BCD-1D21-4085-BF20-CD758396F3FF/0/Item12FHR15613.pdf>