

Agenda Item	13
Report No	RES/44/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Corporate Resources

Date: 24 November 2021

Report Title: The Impact of COVID-19 on Benefits Administration

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Resources and Finance

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The Accounts Commission has published a thematic study which focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on Scottish council's benefit services. The purpose of this report is to share the key messages and recommendations from this study and to provide the local context about this important service for Highland citizens.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are invited to note:

- i. the key messages and recommendations provided by the Accounts Commission; and
- ii. the continuing strong performance of the Council's benefit services and agility to sustain such high levels of performance remotely.

3. Implications

3.1 Resources – the report provides information about the impact that Covid-19 had on the Council's benefit services and highlights related absences. Highland impacts are also provided and demonstrate that available resources were utilised effectively to ensure that the service for the Highland citizens was not comprised. Staff wellbeing and empowerment continues to be a key focus across the Service Delivery Team, and the wider Revenues & Business Support section.

3.2 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – benefit services support equalities and alleviates poverty while also providing much broader socio-economic advantages for citizens and businesses alike.

3.3 There are no Legal, Climate Change/Carbon Clever, risk or Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4. Key Messages – The National Picture

- 4.1 28 of the 32 councils responded to the Accounts Commission's research which established that Scottish councils reacted positively to the implications of Covid-19 and were effective in meeting the significant challenges of delivering benefit services remotely. More than 75% of councils' benefit services were adversely impacted by Covid-19 absences during 2020/21. The worldwide shortage of IT also impacted these services during the early stages of the pandemic although by the end of 2020/21, 62% of councils had either maintained or improved on 2019/20 new claims processing performance. Accuracy of claims had not been adversely impacted with 75% of councils reporting that performance had been maintained, or improved.

5. The Highland Council's Benefit Services

5.1 Absences

Absences were analysed by the Commission to reflect the number of benefit days lost as a direct result of the pandemic. This included when benefit staff could not reasonably work from home due to IT issues, illness, or when following government advice on shielding or self-isolation.

- 5.1.1 For Highland, this research showed that 304 FTE days were lost to the impacts of Covid-19. Local analysis however has established that a very small number of long-term absences were recorded as Covid-related rather than the relevant long-term health conditions and the data reported to the Accounts Commission was based on 7 days, rather than 5 to reflect the working week, and did not reflect the generic working model that operates within the Service Delivery Team. Taking these factors into account, results in 100 benefit days being lost locally to Covid-19.

5.2 Operating Capacity

To ensure business continuity during the pandemic, the Council introduced a flexible approach that enabled employees to balance personal responsibilities with their contractual hours. As a result of the pandemic and for other reasons, many councils operated below FTE complement during 2020/21. In Highland, the Commission report that Service Delivery Team was operating at 83% capacity. This was managed by streamlining policies and procedures, working in closer collaboration with Citizens Advice and mobilising the team to focus on priority areas of work. This ensure business continuity for our benefit recipients and landlords alike.

5.3 Performance

Against a backdrop of absences and IT challenges in the initial phases of the pandemic, the Commission found that the Council's Service Delivery Team, effectively managed an increased caseload while still delivering strong performance for new claims and changes in circumstances as evidenced in the Directorate's Q2 Revenue and Performance monitoring report on today's agenda.

5.4 Accuracy

Context is essential when assessing performance. The Commission therefore examined the accuracy of councils' benefit services, including decision making. For Highland, the Commission established that accuracy was not compromised despite the significant challenges being managed by the Service Delivery Team. In addition to the core benefit services, it is important to also take into account the multiple pandemic payments being managed within Revenues & Business Support at this time and the unprecedented demand for welfare services.

6. The Accounts Commission's Recommendations

- 6.1 The Commission identified the following 6 recommendations as a result of this national study. The Council continues to implement change and to ensure that the Service Delivery team is appropriately equipped (training, ICT, resources, etc) to provide high performing benefit services for Highland citizens and landlords.
- 6.2 **HB Resources:** Councils should ensure that absence data is recorded to a sufficient level of detail to fully determine the impact of the pandemic and to inform future decisions on resourcing.
- 6.3 **HB Resources:** Councils should consider how best to maximise resources to ensure that, in the event of a future pandemic, or similar high impact event, the benefit service is able to operate at full capacity.
- 6.4 **Information Technology:** Councils should consider the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to review operating procedures to ensure that service delivery is agile and responsive to customer and business needs, and that business continuity/resilience plans are updated to take account of lessons learned.
- 6.5 **Claims processing:** Councils should ensure that claims processed using "Trust and Protect" protocols can be identified, and that action is taken to verify evidence at the earliest opportunity to minimise the potential for fraud or error to enter the benefits system, and for avoidable overpayments to occur.
- 6.6 **Accuracy:** As accuracy levels were not significantly adversely affected by homeworking, councils should investigate the reasons for this when considering post pandemic approaches to the structure and delivery of the benefit service.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Resources and Finance

Date: 27 October 2021

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Background Papers: Accounts Commission; The impact of Covid-19 on Scottish councils' benefit services (A thematic study).