

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL
Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services
Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee: 22 December 2010

Subject : Action Plan following Inspection of Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on progress made on the recommendations and subsequent action plan following the inspection of the Council's housing and council tax benefit service carried out by Audit Scotland in December 2008 and follow up risk inspection in July 2010.

2. Background

2.1 Audit Scotland took over the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate responsibilities for the inspection of housing benefits in Scotland on 1 April 2008. The audit of housing benefit considers the extent to which West Dunbartonshire Council is complying with its statutory responsibility to continuously improve the benefits service and, where risks to continuous improvement are identified, to agree action plans for these risks to be addressed.

2.2 A self-assessment of the Council's housing benefits service was conducted and submitted to Audit Scotland in November 2008 and again in July 2010 outlining the service's:-

- Business planning
- Performance reporting
- Meeting the needs of the user and the community, and
- Delivering outcomes.

2.3 Following the submission of the self-assessment, Audit Scotland carried out an inspection of the Benefits service in July 2010.

2.4 Audit Scotland will notify the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of the outcome of the Council's risk assessment. The Council required Audit Scotland to agree the draft action plan to address the risks outstanding from the previous audit and the new risks identified in October 2010.

3. Main Issues

3.1 The Council conducted a self-assessment of the housing benefits service in July 2010 and submitted it to Audit Scotland for evaluation.

3.2 Audit Scotland reviewed the Council's self-assessment submission and were onsite to conduct an evaluation of the assessment in July 2010.

- 3.3** Audit Scotland considered the risks to the housing and council tax benefit service and a report outlining the risks to the service was sent to the Chief Executive in October 2010. A copy of the report is attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.4** The risks identified were analysed and an action plan submitted to Audit Scotland is attached as Appendix 2. As per paragraph 2.4 above, the action plan is subject to Audit Scotland's approval.
- 3.5** Audit Scotland has recognised that the Council has made significant progress to address the risks identified in the January 2009 action plan submitted with 19 actions being fully completed, 4 actions ongoing and 2 actions outstanding at the time of the on site visit.
- 3.5** The report highlights many areas positive practice within the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service. These positive practices include improvements to the Council website and availability of online services, the development and implementation of the Revenues and Benefits Service Plan for 2009/13, the monitoring of performance to senior management and elected Members, the improved performance of the Investigations Team and the reduction of 20% in the cost of administration achieved during the year.
- 3.6** The report has identified two main risks to continuous improvement. These are the decline in new claims processing and the levels of accuracy arising from the pre-payment management checks carried out.
- 3.7** The Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service within the Council is concentrating on improving these areas of performance, particularly the processing times for new claims. Whilst Audit Scotland highlighted the levels of accuracy for pre-payment management checks, the figures stated in the report include the accuracy checks for new members of staff who are subject to a 100% audit. Audit Scotland has agreed that these checks should not be included in our measurement as they have a negative impact on our level of accuracy. We are working to develop a meaningful measure for this area of performance. Audit Scotland has highlighted that the payments made to customers after our pre payment checks remain high at 99%.

4. People Implications

- 4.1** There are no people implications.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1** If the Council fails to implement the action plan there is a risk that the DWP could consider sanctions against the authority either in the form of withholding subsidy payments or the intervention of the Secretary of State in the administration of housing and council tax benefit.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1** Failure to implement an improvement plan for the continuous improvement in housing and council tax benefit administration could result in Audit Scotland carrying out a focused audit on the benefit service and ultimately to instruct the Secretary of State to intervene in the administration of housing and council tax benefit and the potential imposition of subsidy penalties against the authority.

7. Equalities Impact

- 7.1** No significant issues were identified in a screening for potential equality impact of this measure.

8. Conclusions and Recommendation

- 8.1** The benefit service is providing a balanced service with identified areas for improvement.
- 8.2** The Council is committed to maintaining this excellent service and wishes to eliminate the risks identified in the report.
- 8.4** Members are asked to note the Audit Scotland report and the draft action plan submitted to minimise risks and continually improve the Housing and Council Tax Benefits service.

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Date: 2 December 2010

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Appendix 1: Audit Scotland Risk Assessment Report

Appendix 2: Housing and Council Tax Benefit Draft Action Plan

Wards Affected All