

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL
Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services
Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee : 26 May 2010

Subject: Progress on Action Plan following Inspection of Housing 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 benefit service carried out by Audit Scotland in December 2008.

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 outlining the Council's:-
- levels of performance
 - how we meet community needs
 - protecting public money, and
 - achieving continuous improvement.
- 2.3 Following the submission of the self-assessment, Audit Scotland carried out an inspection of the Benefits service in December 2008.
- 2.4 Audit Scotland agreed the action plan to address the risks identified and to promote continuous improvement in March 2009

3. Main Issues

- 3.1 The Council conducted a self-assessment of the housing benefits service in November 2008 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 for three days in December 2008.
- 3.3 Audit Scotland reviewed the Council's housing benefit service and a report outlining the risks to the service and the Council's proposed action plan was approved by the Audit and Performance Review Committee on 25 March 2009.

3.4 A copy of the action plan agreed by the Audit and Performance Review Committee and submitted to Audit Scotland is attached as Appendix 1.

3.5 The Audit Scotland best value follow up report referred to the good practice in a number of performance areas highlighted during the inspection of the benefits service.

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.

8.3 Nineteen of the twenty five recommendations have been completed, with work progressing on the remaining six.

8.4 Members are asked to note the progress made on the action plan submitted to minimise risks and continually improve the Housing Benefits service.

Joyce White
Executive Director of Corporate Services
Date: 7 May 2010

Person to contact: - Marion Smith, Section Head (Revenues & Benefits)
Council Offices, Rosebery Place
Tel. (01389) 7378754
e-mail – Marion Smith@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Appendix 1: Housing and Council Tax Benefit Action Plan Update

Wards Affected All