

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**Report by Strategic Lead - Resources****Corporate Services Committee: 13th February 2019**

Subject: Housing Benefit Performance Audit**1. Purpose**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Committee with information on a report issued by Audit Scotland on their Housing Benefit Performance Audit.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Committee note content of the Audit Scotland Housing Benefit Performance Audit Report and points noted below.

3. Background

- 3.1 Audit Scotland carry out Housing Benefit Performance audits each Autumn with the main objective to help Council's improve their Housing Benefit service but to also hold Councils to account for any failing service.
- 3.2 The report provides 6 key messages for Councils which includes details on the outcomes of the 2017/18 risk assessments carried out by Audit Scotland.
- 3.3 Audit Scotland carried out a performance review on West Dunbartonshire Council's benefit service and provided a risk assessment report in June 2018. A report was submitted to Corporate Services Committee on 22 August 2018 providing a copy of the report and also an action plan to address the risks identified.

4. Main Issues

- 4.1 The report highlights the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) continuing across Scotland and the impact this has on benefit services. UC full service rolled out in West Dunbartonshire on the 28 November 2018 and the resources within the service are sufficient to meet the needs of the existing Housing Benefit caseload.
- 4.2 The report also provides information on 2 new services being provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for Council's to help improve processing performance and debt recovery, which are –
- The Verify Earning and Pensions (VEP) Service, and
 - The Debt Service

The full detail on each service is provided in points 17 to 22 of the report and our benefits service is fully utilising both services.

- 4.3 Having access to the VEP service has allowed the Housing Benefit service up-to-date information on income which has reduced the claimant contact required and also reduced or avoided overpayments of Housing Benefit.
- 4.4 As part of our work with the DWP's Debt Service, the Council received matched cases which are being processed by the Overpayments section to maximise recovery of Housing Benefit overpayments.
- 4.5 The report also provides an update on the wider welfare reforms with the introduction of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, with the new Scottish social security agency, Social Security Scotland, being operational from September 2018.

5. People Implications

- 5.1 There are no people implications.

6. Financial and Procurement Implications

- 6.1 There is a financial risk that without utilising the DWP's Debt Service, the Council would not be maximising our recovery of overpayments of Housing Benefit.
- 6.2 With the introduction of UC and the migration of citizens to UC we will face challenges in not having the ability to recover from ongoing Housing Benefit however with the use of VEPS and other data matches, the team will be proactive and have regular claim reviews to reduce any potential overpayments being created. However it should be noted, at present there is no timetable in place for the migration of existing claimants to UC.
- 6.3 There are no procurement implications.

7. Risk Analysis

- 7.1 There is a risk that without sufficient resources within the Housing Benefits service that there could be a decrease in the service being provided to the claimants however we have in place appropriate measures to manage this.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

- 8.1 No significant issues were identified in a screening for potential equality impact of this report.

9. Consultation

9.1 Legal Services and Finance have been consulted in relation to this report and have advised no issues with the contents of the report.

10. Strategic Assessment

10.1 Proper budgetary control and sound financial practice are cornerstones of good governance and support Council and officers to pursue the 5 strategic priorities of the Council's Strategic Plan. This report forms part of the financial governance of the Council.

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Date: 11th January 2019

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Appendices: Audit Scotland Housing Benefit Performance Report

Background Papers: Housing Benefit Performance Audit Committee Paper –
22nd August 2018
Audit Scotland Risk Assessment Report
Housing Benefit Action Plan

Wards Affected: All council Wards