

Resourcing the benefit service thematic study

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Purpose

1. This paper invites the Commission to consider the draft Housing Benefit thematic study, Resourcing the benefit service, and to agree the proposals for finalising, publishing and promoting the report.
2. The proposed annual update blog is also attached for consideration and agreement. This reporting concludes our agreed programme of work on Housing Benefit and the audit team are therefore keen to engage with the Commission on future plans in this area.

Recommendations

3. The Commission is invited to:
 - consider the key findings in the thematic report and approve the report for publication
 - approve that the annual update be published as a blog on the Commission website and agree that the audit team will work with the Commission sponsors to finalise the content
 - engage on future plans for the Housing Benefit performance audit work programme.

Background

4. The Commission has responsibility for inspecting Housing Benefit services in Scotland under Section 105A of the Local Government Scotland Act 1973. It agreed to this role from 2008, following a request from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This replaced the work of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in Scottish councils. The Commission discharges this responsibility through a programme of Housing Benefit performance audit work.
5. In March 2019, the Commission agreed to a [new approach](#) to Housing Benefit performance audit work. It introduced more thematic cross-cutting reviews to look strategically at issues across councils, reducing the number of individual council-focused performance audits undertaken.
6. Following the publication of the first thematic study '[The impact of Covid-19 on Scottish councils' benefit services](#)' in October 2021, the Commission agreed that 'Resourcing the benefit service' would be the theme of the next study.
7. The Commission also agreed to have two sponsors for this study, Andy Cowie and Andrew Burns.

Resourcing the benefit service

8. Since 2011, the performance of a council's Housing Benefit service has primarily been assessed using the DWPs Speed of Processing performance indicator. This study provides

an insight into the resourcing levels and the work taken on by council benefit services, in addition to Housing Benefit claims processing, to provide wider context on the impact on service delivery and performance levels.

9. All 32 Scottish councils were invited to participate in the study with 28 councils (88 per cent) engaging with the audit team and completing the online questionnaire to support the detailed analysis.
10. Overall, the study highlighted the need for councils to better understand benefit service resourcing and workload levels to ensure that the service is delivered efficiently and effectively to customers that are often in dire need of financial support. In total four recommendations have been made to help councils focus their improvement activity.
11. Subject to comments from Commission members the report will be finalised and published. Any significant amendments will be agreed with the Commission sponsors. A media strategy has been developed to maximise coverage of the report including issuing the final report to all Scottish council chief executives, placing the report on the Commission website and utilising social media.

Annual update

12. The annual update includes the key messages from the thematic study mentioned above but also draws in the findings from our two council-focused Housing Benefit performance audits.
13. The two risk assessments were:
 - [Clackmannanshire Council](#) - where processing performance was the best in Scotland, and we were looking to identify good practice that could be shared across the local authority community.
 - [East Lothian Council](#) - where speed of processing new claims and change events had declined significantly.
14. The reports identified consistent risks to continuous improvement including:
 - A lack of performance reporting to senior management and elected members.
 - Insufficient formal management checking processes to ensure the accuracy of the claims being processed.
 - A lack of focus on overpayment recovery.
15. Similar to last year the proposal is to publish the annual update as a blog on the Commission website with the support of the Commission sponsors.

Future plans

16. The Commission's Housing Benefit performance audit work helps fulfil the priority on reporting on the contribution local government makes to lessening the impact of inequalities, particularly poverty, on different communities. In recent years this work has included the completion of two council-focused Housing Benefit performance audits alongside a thematic study.

17. This work has provided valuable insight into the delivery of benefit services and there is an opportunity to explore whether this work could better support the wider strategy of the Commission.

Conclusion

18. The current approach of assessing a council's Housing Benefit performance using the DWP's Speed of Processing performance indicator should no longer be used in isolation, given the impact of wider factors, including resources and workload pressures.
19. Audit Scotland are keen to engage with the Commission on how the Housing Benefit performance audit activity can support the Commission's strategy.