

AUDIT COMMITTEE – 19TH SEPTEMBER 2012

SUBJECT: WALES AUDIT OFFICE – HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT IMPROVEMENT ASSESSMENT NOVEMBER 2011

REPORT BY: DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise Members of the contents of the report from Wales Audit Office on Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Assessment for this Authority as detailed in Appendix 1.

2. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 2.1 The payment of housing and council tax benefit is a key element of the Council's anti-poverty strategy.

3. THE REPORT

3.1 Background

- 3.1.1 The assessment was based on the audit year 2011 and was generally positive.
- 3.1.2 The assessment was undertaken primarily to establish any arrears that required follow up in more detail. No detailed assessments were considered necessary.
- 3.1.3 The report considered a range of information and provided an assessment of the risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes for service users in four areas of performance and the key points are detailed below.

3.2 Claims Administration

- 3.2.1 The assessment indicated that the arrangements to administer claims should ensure that people receive their benefits in a timely manner and there is little risk of service failure. Page 10 of the appendix details the background to this conclusion.

3.3 Security

- 3.3.1 The report offered the view that the security arrangements in place should ensure that the right benefit is paid to the right people and page 13 of the appendix details the reasons underpinning this conclusion. The detail on page 13 slightly contradicts the headline opinion in that it also concludes that there is a medium risk of failure. We are uncomfortable with the conclusions and have expressed these views to the authors, and it certainly does not reflect our view of this element of the service. This issue will form part of a further review in 2013. The conclusions are based around issues surrounding potential fraud and it is worth noting that, as from 01/4/13, fraud investigation in relation to housing benefit will fall within the remit of the single fraud investigation service.

3.4 Customer Focus

- 3.4.1 The assessment indicated that the customer focus arrangements in place should ensure good access to the benefit service and the basis for this conclusion is contained on page 14 of the report.

3.5 Resource Management

- 3.5.1 The report indicates that the Council is contributing about half a million pounds towards the cost of providing the service but the total cost per claim is well below the Welsh average. Page 16 of the report gives the background to this conclusion.

3.6 Review

- 3.6.1 A further review this year is not recommended and the review in 2013 will follow up on a number of issues contained in the report.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no financial implications.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no direct equalities implications stemming from this report on any group identified in Section 6 of the Council's Strategic Equality Plan, therefore an impact assessment has not been carried out.

6. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no personnel implications

7. CONSULTATIONS

- 7.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been reflected in this report.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 Members are requested to note the contents of this report.

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Scammell, Head of Corporate Finance
Cllr G Jones, Deputy Leader/Cabinet Member for Housing
Cllr K Reynolds, Deputy Leader/Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

Appendices:
Appendix 1 Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Assessment - Report from Wales Audit Office