

News release on behalf of the Accounts Commission

Embargoed until 00:01 hours, Wednesday, 15 February 2023

Councils need to better manage workloads and staffing levels to improve housing benefit services

Many people are waiting longer for housing benefit claims to be processed as services across Scotland's councils face rising workloads, fewer staff and high sickness absence levels.

The Accounts Commission, the independent body that holds councils to account, says councils need to better manage staffing levels and workloads, and put in place contingency arrangements.

Council benefit teams are operating with greatly reduced staffing levels, often with a deficit of ten per cent or more, and sickness absences are persistently higher than the national average. Flexible location working arrangements are now prevalent in council benefit services. Whilst there has been a drop in the amount of short-term sick leave, it is also taking longer to process benefit claims. As people claiming housing benefit are often in urgent need of financial support, councils must better understand the impact of flexible location working arrangements on the delivery of the service.

Councils are implementing some improvements to service delivery and people's experience, through new technologies such as robotics and automation. This will help improve access to benefit services, increase response times and reduce the number of days taken to process claims.

William Moyes, Chair of the Accounts Commission said: "Clients needing housing benefit are often in urgent need. It is vital that councils have sufficient resources, alongside experienced staff, to manage increased workloads and staff absences. This will help ensure services are delivered more efficiently and effectively."

"It is positive that councils have continued to invest in different technologies, helping achieve some improvements. But the level of staff absence is a significant concern, and it is vital that councils understand the potential impacts of flexible location working arrangements on the performance of the service they provide."

For further information contact Joanna Mansell: T: 07970331858 jmansell@audit-scotland.gov.uk or media@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Notes to editors

1. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk:

- The Accounts Commission holds councils and other local government bodies in Scotland to account and helps them improve by reporting to the public on their performance. We operate impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government

- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.

2. The Housing Benefit scheme helps customers pay their rent if they are unemployed, on a low income, or claiming benefits. It is administered by councils on behalf of the DWP. In 2021/22 Scotland's councils paid out more than £1.2 billion in Housing Benefit to over 260,000 households.