

7. AUDIT SCOTLAND REPORT: HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE
AUDIT - ANNUAL UPDATE 2018

The committee considered a report (copies of which had been circulated) by the Head of Finance and Property Services providing an update on the Audit Scotland's report on the Housing Benefit performance audits carried out during 2017/18.

The main objective of the benefit performance audit was to help councils improve their benefits service and to hold councils to account for any failing services. Assessment took place every autumn and had two phases: a risk assessment and a focused audit phase.

Audit Scotland had performed risk assessment visits to five councils and had identified a total of 24 risks to continuous improvement. Weaknesses had been identified in business planning and performance, quality checking and intervention outcomes; outstanding risks related to accuracy, interventions and overpayments. Audit Scotland reported that in all the five councils visited, the level of resources might not be sufficient to maintain or improve on previous claims processing performance levels.

The roll out of Universal Credit remained the most significant change to the social security landscape. A report by the National Audit Office published in June 2018 had identified a number of ongoing issues; the Scottish Government had introduced two flexibilities as of October 2018 to how Universal Credit claimants in Scotland could choose to receive their payment.

Audit Scotland also commented on a number of ongoing developments with the potential to impact on housing benefit performance levels going forward. In West Lothian, performance statistics for the speed of processing housing benefit new claims and changes had improved significantly.

In conclusion, Audit Scotland had recognised the improvements made by the councils visited; it also acknowledged ongoing pressures due to Universal Credit roll out and additional welfare reforms. West Lothian Council would continue to work on improving the service and proactively address future challenges of Welfare Reform. The current housing benefit performance statistics for West Lothian remained excellent and a further visit by Audit Scotland was not anticipated.

It was recommended that the Audit Committee note the content of Audit Scotland's annual update report.

Decision

To note the terms of the report.