

Audit Committee Update

Thanet District Council

Audit 2011/12

The Audit Commission is a public corporation set up in 1983 to protect the public purse.

The Commission appoints auditors to councils, NHS bodies (excluding NHS Foundation trusts), police authorities and other local public services in England, and oversees their work. The auditors we appoint are either Audit Commission employees (our in-house Audit Practice) or one of the private audit firms. Our Audit Practice also audits NHS foundation trusts under separate arrangements.

We also help public bodies manage the financial challenges they face by providing authoritative, unbiased, evidence-based analysis and advice.

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Introduction

- 1** The purpose of this paper is to provide the Audit Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors. It includes an update on the externalisation of the Audit Practice.
- 2** This paper also seeks to highlight key emerging national issues and developments which may be of interest to members of the Audit Committee. The paper concludes by asking a number of questions which the Committee may wish to consider in order to assess whether it has received sufficient assurance on emerging issues.
- 3** If you require any additional information regarding the issues included within this briefing, please feel free to contact me or your Audit Manager using the contact details at the end of this update.
- 4** Finally, please also remember to visit our website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk) which now enables you to sign-up to be notified of any new content that is relevant to your type of organisation.

Andy Mack

District Auditor

1 December 2011

Progress Report

Financial statements and VFM conclusion

5 I have concluded our 2010/11 work on the financial statements and VFM conclusion. The findings from the 2010/11 audit are detailed in the Annual Audit Letter. This is presented separately on tonight's committee agenda.

6 On 30 September 2011, I issued an unqualified opinion on the financial statements and gave an unqualified value for money conclusion, stating that the Council has proper arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

7 I have begun my planning work for the 2011/12 audit, working closely with officers and internal audit. I will provide full details of my planning risks and proposed work programme to the next committee meeting.

Grant Claim Certification

8 For 2010/11, the following grant claims, for Thanet DC, require certification by the Audit Commission:

- Housing and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy
- Housing Subsidy
- Housing Base Data Return
- National Non-Domestic Rates Return
- Disabled Facilities Grant
- Pooling of Capital Receipts Return.

9 We have now certified all of the above claims. Full details of all certification findings will be reported to the next meeting of this committee in our annual grants report.

10 The Housing and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy grant claim is, by far, the largest grant claim totalling £80 million in 2010/11. As a result of audit, the claim was reduced by £6,688 and certified with qualification.

11 There is a requirement to be able to track payments made in subsidy through to the impact in the finance system. Out of £78,284,880 of payments within the subsidy claim, evidence of £6,233 was unable to be provided and therefore subsidy is not able to be claimed on this amount, and the claim has therefore been reduced.

12 The further reduction of £455 was due to agreed changes made as a result of the errors identified within the Non HRA caseload. (see table 1 below)

13 A key element of our certification approach involves taking a sample of benefit cases from the entries on an authority's subsidy claim form and undertaking detailed testing on these cases using workbooks. The focus of testing is to consider whether benefit has been awarded in accordance with regulations, and that benefit has been recorded correctly for subsidy purposes.

14 Our testing identified the following errors. Further testing for failing attributes was undertaken on the full populations involved. Our results are summarised as follows:

Table 1: **Findings of sample subsidy testing for HBCOUNT**

Subsidy Type	Initial sample	Additional testing
Rent Rebates	19/20 passed	All 48 similar cases reviewed and confirmed as an isolated error - claim amended for individual case.
Non-HRA rent rebates	10/16 passed	For each error identified, all similar cases within the 76 case non-hra population were tested. Further testing identified 5 additional errors. Of the total 11 errors identified, 3 underpayments were reported in the qualification letter and amendments made for the remaining 8 issues.
Rent Allowances	20/20 passed	No further testing.
Council Tax Benefit	20/20 passed	No further testing.

15 In addition to the amendments above, we were required to submit a supporting qualification letter to the department in respect of the following:

- Reconciliation differences between benefit paid and granted within the subsidy system. (see paragraph 11 above)
- Errors resulting in underpayment of subsidy. (see table 1 above)

16 We are required to report any unadjusted errors, system or reconciliation issues in a qualification letter to the DWP. These reports are not uncommon and there are no resulting concerns or actions to bring to the attention of this committee.

17 The qualification letter submitted is included at Appendix A.

Other Matters of Interest

Update on the externalisation of the Audit Practice

18 The Audit Commission's Chief Executive, Eugene Sullivan, wrote to clients on 21 September 2011 summarising the Department for Communities and Local Government's plans for externalising the Audit Commission's work that is currently undertaken by the Audit Practice.

19 The key points are:

- Contracts will be let from 2012/13 on a three- or five-year basis. The earliest you will be able to appoint your own auditors is therefore for the 2015/16 audit.
- The work is split into four regions, comprising ten 'lots'. Each lot will be awarded separately, but any individual bidder can only win a maximum of one lot in each region (i.e. four lots in total).
- The Commission is managing a fair and equitable procurement process to allow suitable private-sector providers the opportunity to bid.
- Bids are due in by mid-December 2011, with the contract awards planned for mid-February 2012, with formal Commission approval planned for late July 2012 following consultation.
- Appointments will start on 1 September 2012. As such, the Commission will extend the current audit appointment to allow any audit issues arising between 1 April 2012 and 31 August 2012 to be dealt with. The costs of this 'interim' audit role will be met by the Commission.
- Audit Practice staff in each lot area will in the main transfer to the successful bidders on 31 October 2012.

20 A further update was provided in Eugene Sullivan's letter to clients of 10 November 2011. Thirteen potential providers have now been invited to tender following the initial pre-qualification stage.

21 Further details are available on the Audit Commission's website. We will continue to keep you updated on developments.

22 Against this background, the Audit Practice's focus remains:

- Fulfilling our remaining responsibilities – completing our work for 2010/11 and delivering your 2011/12 audit - to the high standards you expect and deserve.
- Managing a smooth transition from the Audit Practice to your new audit provider.

Income Generation

23 Income from fees and charges is a key financial area for local authorities with the top ten income streams generating over £7 billion each year.

24 CIPFA has recently produced an updated guide to income generation and much has happened since the earlier editions were published in 2005 and 2008.

25 In 2011, organisations are looking at income in its widest sense as a key factor in their funding equation. The economic downturn has demonstrated the risks associated with excessive reliance on income from fees and charges. However, the Spending Review 2010 has motivated local authorities to evaluate robustly every possible funding source.

26 Rather than just focussing on savings, organisations are increasingly focussing on maximising their income generation opportunities.

27 This new 2011 edition should enable local authorities to make the most of their fees and charges potential. It provides a full update of the charging opportunities available as at March 2011, reflecting recent legislation and regulations.

Code on Data Transparency

28 On 29 September 2011 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.

29 Subject to consultation, we understand that Ministers are minded to make this Code a legally binding requirement.

30 The Code requires local authorities to publish public data as soon as possible following production even if it is not accompanied with detailed analysis. Where practical, local authorities should seek to publish in real time. As a minimum, the public data that should be released are:

- expenditure over £500 (including costs, supplier and transaction information);
- senior employee salaries, names (with the option for individuals to refuse to consent for their name to be published), job descriptions, responsibilities, budgets and numbers of staff;
- an organisational chart of the staff structure of the local authority including salary bands and details of currently vacant posts;
- the 'pay multiple' - the ratio between the highest paid salary and the median average salary of the whole of the authority's workforce;
- councillors' allowances and expenses;
- copies of contracts and tenders to businesses and to the voluntary community and social enterprise sector;
- grants to the voluntary community and social enterprise sector should be clearly itemised and listed;
- policies, performance, external audits and key inspections and key indicators on the authority's fiscal and financial position;
- the location of public land and building assets and key attribute information that is normally recorded on asset registers; and
- data regarding the democratic running of the local authority including the constitution, election results, committee minutes, decision - making processes and records of decisions.

Guides to Local Government Finance

31 CIPFA has recently issued a comprehensive guide to Local Government finance. This guide reflects proposals for academies, HRA self financing, the future of local audit, police and crime commissioners and social care reform.

32 In addition to the above changes, the guide also looks at the impact the recent cuts have had on local authority finances.

33 In addition to the comprehensive guide, a shorter guide has also been prepared which is aimed specifically at members. It provides councillors with a brief overview of key facts, figures and requirements in relation to local government finance in a more user friendly and handy reference format.

For information: Fighting Fraud Together

34 In October 2011, thirty-seven organisations joined forces to launch 'Fighting Fraud Together', a new strategy that aims to reduce fraud - a crime estimated to cost the UK £38 billion every year.

35 The organisations involved include the NHS, the Charity Commission, the Department for Communities and Local Government, HM Revenues and Customs and the Association of Chief Police Officers.

36 It is the first time that government, industry, voluntary groups and law enforcement agencies have joined together on such a large scale to sign a joint commitment to tackle fraud.

37 All thirty-seven partners that have signed up to the 'Fighting Fraud Together' strategy which will contribute to and be accountable for its success.

38 The strategy and its accompanying action plan place a strong emphasis on preventing fraud through greater fraud awareness and self protection, combined with stronger government and industry prevention systems and controls.

39 Examples of the new initiatives include:

- Preventing fraud: Industry and the public sector will develop their intelligence-sharing capabilities to prevent fraud attacks;
- Increasing awareness and reporting: A new research tool will help all sectors provide more targeted prevention advice to the public, particularly vulnerable people, and develop a better understanding of small businesses' vulnerability to fraud and the support they need; and
- A more effective enforcement response: Greater intelligence capabilities of the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau will disrupt fraudsters' activities and rapidly close down the channels through which they operate and launder money.

Key Considerations

The Audit Committee may wish to consider the following questions in respect of the issues highlighted in this briefing paper.

- Has the Council reviewed CIPFA's guide on income generation and is the Audit Committee satisfied that all potential income sources have been identified?
- Has the Council adequate arrangements in place to ensure that it complies with the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency and that all published information is both accurate and complete?
- Have Members been provided with a copy of CIPFA's guide to Local Government finance?

Contact Details

40 If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, please feel free to contact either your District Auditor or Audit Manager.

41 Alternatively, all Audit Commission reports - and a wealth of other material - can be found on our website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

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Appendix A: Qualification Letter for Housing and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy Grant Claim 2010-11

Department for Work and Pensions
Housing Benefits Unit
Room 512
Norcross
BLACKPOOL
FY5 3TA

Dear Sir / Madam

Thanet District Council

Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit claim for the year ended 31 March 2011 (Form MPF720A)

Qualification Letter referred to in the Auditor's Certificate dated 28 November 2011

Details of the matters giving rise to my qualification of the above claim are set out in the Appendix to this letter.

The factual content of my qualification has been agreed with officers of the Authority.

No amendments have been made to the claim for the issues raised in this qualification letter.

Yours faithfully

Lisa Robertson
Audit Manager

Benefit software: reconciliation of benefit granted to paid

The Authority uses the Civica benefit software. The software supplier provides a method for the Authority to reconcile benefit granted per the benefit software (net of adjustments such as local schemes, DHP, write offs and overpayments) to benefit paid per the benefit software. These reconciliations have been prepared for each benefit type, but the following unexplained variances in the two figures have not been followed up:

Claim cell:	Amount granted (net of adjustments) £	Amount paid £	Unexplained variance £
055 – HRA Rent Rebates	7,220,898.17	7,218,192.48	1,135.94
011 and 092 – Rent Allowances and Non-HRA Rent Rebates	55,797,394.36	55,796,259.02	2,705.69
142 – Council Tax Benefit	15,266.587.45	15,264,194.66	2,392.79

The lower of the figures for each headline cell has been used in the subsidy claim.

Cell 011: Non-HRA Rent Rebates – Total expenditure (Benefit Granted)**Cell Total: £ 80,231****Cell Population: 76 cases**

Testing of the initial sample identified 2 cases where benefit had been underpaid. This was as a result of the Authority incorrectly inputting data from notification of liability.

100% of cases included in these cells were tested and confirmed 1 other similar error resulting in an underpayment.

As there is no eligibility to subsidy for benefit which has not been paid, the underpayment identified does not affect subsidy and has not, therefore, been classified as an error for subsidy purposes.