

Resourcing the benefit service

A thematic study



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
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Key messages

- 1** In response to the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013, and the subsequent reduction in Housing Benefit caseloads, most councils expanded the remit of the benefit service to carry out other financial assessments.
 - 2** It is vital that councils have sufficient resources within the benefit service to manage increased workloads and staff absences, to ensure that the service is delivered efficiently and effectively to customers that are often in dire need of financial support.
 - 3** In 2021/22, a third of councils operated the benefit service with a staff deficit of ten per cent or more, when compared to the full-time equivalent (FTE) complement. Although overall benefit service staffing levels have been falling since 2019/20, the majority of councils are retaining suitably experienced staff.
 - 4** Since 2020/21, when the benefit service was being delivered remotely following Scottish Government Covid-19 guidance, most councils experienced a reduction in short-term sick leave. Despite this, in 2021/22, benefit service sickness levels in the majority of Scottish councils exceeded the 2021 UK average of 2.2 per cent.
 - 5** Some councils were disproportionately affected by increased workloads arising from processing Covid-19 support payments. When comparing workloads per average FTE staff member, the differences between councils are significant.
 - 6** Councils do not record sufficient information to understand the impact of call handling and personal callers on benefit service staff.
 - 7** Flexible working is now prevalent for benefit service staff and correlates with a reduction in short term sick leave, but also a decline in Speed of Processing performance.
 - 8** Improvements to service delivery and customer experience are being identified from the use of innovative and new technologies such as robotics and automation.
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About this report

- 1.** Since the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) introduced Universal Credit in 2013, there have been many changes to councils' benefit services. As more claims for housing costs were processed by the DWP, to protect jobs and retain knowledge and expertise, most councils expanded the remit of the benefit service to carry out other financial assessments.
- 2.** In some councils this additional work, including processing the Scottish Government's Covid-19 support schemes since 2020/21, has resulted in a significant increase in workload, placing extra pressures on the benefit service.
- 3.** Resourcing the benefit service is key to understanding performance. In 2021/22, a third of councils operated the service with a staff deficit of ten per cent or more, when compared to the full-time equivalent complement.
- 4.** With a focus on resourcing and the work of the benefit service in addition to Housing Benefit claims processing, this study aims to highlight and provide wider context on the impact on service delivery and performance levels.
- 5.** All 32 Scottish councils were invited to participate in the study and 28 councils (88 per cent) engaged with us and completed the online questionnaire. Clackmannanshire Council, Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar, East Ayrshire Council, and The Highland Council did not participate.
- 6.** The data and analysis in this report is based on questionnaire responses and has not been independently validated, except for claims processing performance and caseload information, which have been obtained from DWP published data.
- 7.** We would like to thank all councils for their participation in the study and in particular officers from City of Edinburgh Council, Dundee City Council, Fife Council, Moray Council and Orkney Islands Council for their help in the development and review of the questionnaire.

Background

- 8.** 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, over 260,000 people in Scotland were in receipt of Housing Benefit and Scottish councils paid out more than £1.2 billion to assist some of the most vulnerable people in the community.
- 9.** In October 2010, the UK Government announced that Universal Credit would replace and simplify the current welfare benefit system. This new benefit amalgamated six means-tested benefits, including Housing Benefit, into a single monthly payment. It was introduced by the DWP in 2013, with a planned full implementation date of 2018.
- 10.** The 2010 announcement was a catalyst for councils to re-evaluate their benefit service as Housing Benefit caseloads were predicted to decrease year-on-year. Many councils adapted the benefit service to protect existing jobs and expertise by expanding the remit to include other financial assessments, such as Free School Meals, School Clothing Grants, Education Maintenance Awards, and applications to the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- 11.** Additionally, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government created national hardship schemes to support individuals and businesses. Many of these schemes, such as Self-isolation Support Payments and Low-income Pandemic Payments, were administered by councils utilising existing expertise within the benefit service to process applications.
- 12.** Since 2011, the performance of a council's Housing Benefit service has primarily been assessed by Audit Scotland using the DWP's Speed of Processing performance indicator. This is the average number of days that councils take to process new claims and change events. The impact on claims processing performance, of additional workloads, resource levels and other activities carried out by benefit service staff have not previously been considered.

1. Workloads

Most benefit services carry out other assessments in addition to processing housing benefit claims

13. When considering councils' Speed of Processing performance, the DWP takes account of the average time (in days) to process new claims and change events to existing claims. Housing Benefit caseloads, caseload complexity, other workloads, and factors such as available staff resources are not considered.

14. However, in isolation, Speed of Processing performance is not always indicative of a council's overall relative performance. Many other factors can impact on claims processing times making it more challenging to directly compare councils' performance across Scotland. For example, in 2019/20, 15 of the 28 councils in our study (54 per cent) processed over 83,000 applications for assistance from the Scottish Welfare Fund in addition to processing Housing Benefit claims. Almost all Scottish councils (27 of the 28 who responded) carry out other assessments in addition to claims processing.

15. [Exhibit 1](#) is an extract of the other types of assessment carried out by Scottish councils' benefit services in 2022/23. Full details are provided at [Appendix 1](#).

Exhibit 1

Additional processing activities carried out by benefit services in 2022/23

| Council | Additional processing activities |
|---------------|---|
| Aberdeenshire | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Money Advice, Blue Badge Scheme, Local Discretionary Scheme, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Flexible Food Fund (10) |
| Angus | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Free School Meals (Direct Payments), Cost of Living Award, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (10) |

| Council | Additional processing activities |
|------------------------------|--|
| Dumfries and Galloway | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (7) |
| Renfrewshire | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (5) |
| Scottish Borders | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), Free School Meals (Direct Payments), School Clothing Grants (4) |
| West Lothian | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Free School Meals (Direct Payments), Winter Support Fund (10) |

Source: Scottish councils

16. The number and type of additional processing activities carried out by councils varies significantly, illustrating the difficulty in directly comparing Housing Benefit claims processing performance based solely on the DWP's Speed of Processing indicator. Although some benefit services have a wider remit than others, additional factors also need to be considered, including:

- the resources available to the service, including staff absences and experience levels
- caseloads and the complexity of each claim type
- other activities undertaken, for example, call handling and dealing with personal callers.

17. These are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2. Resources

18. The assessment of Housing Benefit claims is a complex process that requires staff to work across multiple systems and have a detailed understanding of the relevant legislation.

19. The addition of new workstreams in response to the introduction of Universal Credit meant that councils invested in training to enable staff to process these applications efficiently and effectively. In doing so, councils have increased the level of knowledge and expertise among benefit service staff, protected jobs, and enabled the delivery of a more generic and robust service, as staff are able to work across multiple disciplines.

Overall benefit service staffing levels have been falling since 2019/20

20. We asked councils to provide data on the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff that were in post at the beginning of each financial year from 2019/20 to 2022/23. This is captured in [Exhibit 2](#) and shows staffing levels decreasing year-on-year, equating to an overall 9.6 per cent reduction during the period.

Exhibit 2

Benefit service FTE staffing levels 2019/20 – 2022/23 (28 councils)

| Year | Number of staff | Change |
|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2019/20 | 1,137 | - |
| 2020/21 | 1,102 | ↓ -3.1 per cent |
| 2021/22 | 1,054 | ↓ -4.4 per cent |
| 2022/23 | 1,028 | ↓ -2.5 per cent |

Source: Scottish councils

21. Over the same period there has been a 26 per cent reduction in the Housing Benefit caseload suggesting that benefit service diversification into other financial assessments has helped retain staff. This is borne out at an operational level, with 25 of the 28 councils (89 per cent) in our study having more staff in post than the equivalent represented by the caseload reduction.

22. However, there remains a significant variation in FTE staff levels across Scotland, with Aberdeen City Council reporting a decrease of 38 per cent, while Dumfries and Galloway Council reported an increase of 31 per cent during the period.

23. [Exhibit 3](#) details the ten councils that have had the greatest reduction in the number of FTE staff in post between April 2019 and April 2022. A full breakdown of benefit service staffing levels is provided at [Appendix 2](#).

Exhibit 3

Reduction in FTE staff in post between April 2019 and April 2022

| Council | FTE in post April 2019 | FTE in post April 2022 | Change (number) | Change (per cent) |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 45.31 | 28.05 | -17.26 | -38.1 |
| City of Edinburgh | 99.00 | 87.00 | -12.00 | -12.1 |
| Dundee City | 59.20 | 51.53 | -7.67 | -13.0 |
| Fife | 56.00 | 44.00 | -12.00 | -21.4 |
| Inverclyde | 15.63 | 11.57 | -4.06 | -26.0 |
| North Ayrshire | 27.90 | 24.20 | -3.70 | -13.3 |
| Renfrewshire | 56.95 | 41.88 | -15.07 | -26.5 |
| South Ayrshire | 51.00 | 41.00 | -10.00 | -19.6 |
| West Dunbartonshire | 14.50 | 11.50 | -3.00 | -20.7 |
| West Lothian | 39.66 | 30.54 | -9.12 | -23.0 |

Source: Scottish councils

24. Although the number of FTE staff in post is indicative of the resources that were available to the benefit service each year, to establish how many vacancies the service operated with, we asked councils to also provide the total number of staff in the benefit service structure (FTE complement).

25. [Exhibit 4](#) details the number of vacancies each year from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July), for the 23 councils that provided full data. This is based on the average of the number of FTE staff that were in post at the beginning and end of each year, compared to the FTE complement at the beginning of the year.

26. Data in red and bold indicates that the council operated the benefit service with a vacancy rate of ten per cent or more below FTE complement.

Exhibit 4

Benefit service FTE vacancies 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July) (23 councils)

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 3.11 | 6.35 | 6.32 | 9.32 |
| Aberdeenshire | 5.90 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 1.00 |
| Angus | 0.75 | 0.50 | 0.00 | -1.00 |
| Argyll and Bute | 0.25 | 0.50 | 0.75 | 0.35 |
| Dundee City | 4.25 | 8.29 | 7.65 | 8.70 |
| East Dunbartonshire | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| East Renfrewshire | 1.00 | 0.00 | 0.50 | 2.00 |
| Falkirk | 1.50 | 1.80 | 3.07 | 3.54 |
| Fife | 2.25 | 3.75 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Glasgow | -0.65 | 4.30 | 3.29 | 3.15 |
| Inverclyde | 3.61 | 3.01 | 2.67 | 0.79 |
| Moray | 0.00 | 0.75 | 1.60 | 2.50 |
| North Ayrshire | 1.20 | 1.55 | 0.50 | 1.00 |
| North Lanarkshire | 2.32 | 2.82 | 2.82 | 7.82 |
| Orkney Islands | 0.90 | 0.40 | 0.90 | 1.40 |
| Perth and Kinross | 0.00 | 0.75 | 0.25 | 0.50 |
| Renfrewshire | 3.85 | 0.57 | 4.70 | 5.60 |
| Scottish Borders | 3.00 | 2.25 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| Shetland Islands | 0.15 | 0.29 | 0.58 | 0.00 |
| South Ayrshire | 4.25 | 3.25 | 4.00 | 4.50 |
| South Lanarkshire | 15.50 | 6.82 | 4.38 | 6.68 |

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| West Dunbartonshire | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.50 | 0.25 |
| West Lothian | 9.28 | 0.71 | 0.21 | 0.21 |

Source: Scottish councils

27. The table above shows that 18 of the 23 councils (78 per cent) in 2019/20 carried vacancies and operated the benefit service at between 0.9 per cent (Argyll and Bute) and 27 per cent (Scottish Borders) below FTE complement.

28. This trend continued in 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 with over 87 per cent of councils managing vacancies each year. Of note, are Aberdeen City Council, Dundee City Council, and Scottish Borders Council who have been operating with a staff deficit of more than ten per cent for the last three years. This illustrates that councils are experiencing difficulty recruiting and maintaining benefit service staff levels at the agreed complement.

Recommendation 1

Where the benefit service is operating below complement, councils should investigate the reasons for this and seek to address the shortfall, with a view to improving service delivery and claims processing performance.

The majority of councils are retaining suitably experienced staff

29. Councils told us that a new benefit officer would require approximately 18 months of training and support to have sufficient knowledge and experience to work independently. Therefore, it could be expected that benefit services with a greater proportion of experienced officers (>18 months) would perform better than a service with more inexperienced staff that required support to process claims.

30. We asked councils to provide data on the number of staff within the benefit service that met this criterion. More than half of the council's (15 of the 25 that provided the required data) commenced 2022/23 with a fully experienced benefit service. In contrast, Renfrewshire Council's benefit service with 24 per cent of staff considered inexperienced had a decline in new claims processing performance in quarter one of 2022/23, from an average of 21 days to an average of 39 days.

31. Although the decline in Renfrewshire Council's performance correlates with a high level of inexperienced benefit service staff, to confirm this is a contributory factor, further investigation would be required. It is illustrative of the need to consider all aspects of the benefit service when assessing Speed of Processing performance.

In 2021/22, a third of councils operated the benefit service with a staff deficit of ten per cent or more when compared to the FTE complement, but this is an improvement on the 2019/20 position

32. Although staff levels and staff experience can be considered contributory factors to the performance of a benefit service, the most significant factor that can affect a council's Speed of Processing performance is the availability of staff during the year.

33. While forward planning and contingency arrangements can be used to manage known absences, such as annual leave or parental leave, unexpected absences are more challenging. For example, bereavement leave, compassionate leave and, during the Covid-19 pandemic, staff with family commitments being required to self-isolate.

34. We asked councils to provide staff absence data for the period 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July). Full data was provided for 21 out of the 28 councils (75 per cent). [Exhibit 5](#) details the average percentage of FTE benefit service staff that were available (excluding annual leave) during this period.

35. Staff levels are based on the average number of FTE staff in post at the beginning and end of each financial year, and data in red and bold indicates councils that operated with a staff deficit of ten per cent or more.

Exhibit 5

Benefit service average FTE staff levels for the period 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July)

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Aberdeenshire | 78% | 80% | 89% | 95% |
| Angus | 99% | 99% | 99% | 99% |
| Argyll and Bute | 79% | 93% | 82% | 92% |
| City of Edinburgh | 73% | 95% | 96% | 98% |
| Dundee City | 87% | 95% | 92% | 97% |
| East Dunbartonshire | 78% | 94% | 94% | 98% |
| East Renfrewshire | 84% | 97% | 92% | 92% |
| Fife | 79% | 94% | 93% | 97% |
| Glasgow City | 85% | 90% | 95% | 98% |
| Inverclyde | 69% | 91% | 84% | 95% |

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|-------------------|------------|---------|------------|-------------------------|
| Moray | 75% | 95% | 98% | 99% |
| North Lanarkshire | 76% | 95% | 91% | 98% |
| Orkney Islands | 72% | 95% | 76% | 100% |
| Perth and Kinross | 80% | 99% | 98% | 99% |
| Renfrewshire | 91% | 95% | 87% | 93% |
| Scottish Borders | 85% | 99% | 96% | 99% |
| Shetland Islands | 74% | 96% | 97% | 99% |
| South Ayrshire | 79% | 94% | 91% | 98% |
| South Lanarkshire | 72% | 91% | 89% | 98% |
| Stirling | 81% | 94% | 99% | 99% |
| West Lothian | 74% | 94% | 85% | 98% |
| Scottish average | 80% | 94% | 92% | 97% |

Source: Scottish councils

36. 2021/22 was a particularly challenging year with a third of councils operating the benefit service with a staff deficit of ten per cent or more, when compared to the FTE complement. There are varying experiences across Scottish councils with particular pressures evident for Argyll and Bute Council, Inverclyde Council, Orkney Islands Council and West Lothian Council.

37. For example, in 2021/22, East Dunbartonshire Council and Inverclyde Council experienced a similar decline in new claims processing performance of an average of four days. In this instance, based on new claims processing times, both councils have delivered the same level of performance. However, when factoring in available resources, Inverclyde Council performed better, as it delivered the same level of performance as East Dunbartonshire Council with ten per cent less staff.

38. Although the picture for 2022/23 appears more positive, the data was for the period to 31 July 2022 due to the timing of our fieldwork. It is therefore unclear whether the improving picture was maintained.

In 2021/22, benefit service sickness levels in most Scottish councils exceeded the 2021 UK average

39. There are many reasons that staff levels fluctuate throughout the year. Staff leave the service, new staff are appointed, sick leave and parental leave are all events that must be managed effectively to maintain a good level of service.

40. We analysed the reasons for staff absences in 2021/22 and found that sickness absence, including leave attributed to Covid-19, accounted for most staff absences during the year. [Exhibit 6](#) details the level of sickness absence for the 25 councils that provided full data, as a percentage of the total number of available workdays (excluding annual leave) in 2021/22.

41. This table shows that sickness absence levels in 20 of the 25 councils (80 per cent) in our study were greater than the UK average of 2.2 per cent, as reported in the [Office of National Statistics sickness absence report 2021](#).

Exhibit 6

Sickness absence as a percentage of available workdays in 2021/22

| Council | Total available workdays | Sickness absence (days) | Percentage of available workdays |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 7,169 | 225 | 3% |
| Aberdeenshire | 14,024 | 1,084 | 8% |
| Argyll and Bute | 5,756 | 448 | 8% |
| City of Edinburgh | 19,886 | 618 | 3% |
| Dundee City | 11,674 | 620 | 5% |
| East Dunbartonshire | 5,564 | 195 | 4% |
| East Lothian | 4,294 | 102 | 2% |
| East Renfrewshire | 3,693 | 253 | 7% |
| Falkirk | 6,616 | 412 | 6% |
| Fife | 9,724 | 442 | 5% |
| Glasgow City | 33,181 | 1,395 | 4% |
| Inverclyde | 2,436 | 198 | 8% |
| Midlothian | 4,561 | 80 | 2% |

| Council | Total available workdays | Sickness absence (days) | Percentage of available workdays |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Moray | 3,976 | 62 | 2% |
| North Lanarkshire | 9,393 | 778 | 8% |
| Orkney Islands | 745 | 166 | 22% |
| Perth and Kinross | 4,733 | 62 | 1% |
| Renfrewshire | 9,755 | 800 | 8% |
| Scottish Borders | 1,992 | 79 | 4% |
| Shetland Islands | 1,272 | 36 | 3% |
| South Ayrshire | 9,212 | 534 | 6% |
| South Lanarkshire | 21,250 | 1,365 | 6% |
| Stirling | 5,179 | 28 | 1% |
| West Dunbartonshire | 2,572 | 280 | 11% |
| West Lothian | 6,720 | 501 | 7% |

Source: Scottish councils

42. Of particular concern is that sickness absence levels in 14 of the 25 councils (56 per cent) was greater than twice the United Kingdom average. Despite this, four councils reported that they did not recruit any additional staff in 2021/22 to help the benefit service manage these absences.

43. Of these, South Lanarkshire Council was able to maintain new claims processing times in 2021/22. However, Fife Council, Inverclyde Council, and Orkney Islands Council saw a decline in performance of an average of twelve days, four days, and two days respectively.

44. Councils should aim to maintain staff resources throughout the year as close as possible to the FTE complement to ensure that the benefit service delivers a good level of service to customers.

Recommendation 2

Councils should investigate the reasons for sickness absence levels that are above the national average and have sufficient contingency arrangements in place to manage unexpected staff shortages.

45. When building a profile of each council’s benefit service, taking account of available resources can provide an important insight into the potential reasons for under-performance, and is a key factor when assessing Speed of Processing performance. Therefore, it is essential that councils maintain an accurate and complete record of staff absences and can be proactive in responding to any increasing trends.

Flexible working is now prevalent for benefit service staff and correlates with a reduction in short term sick leave, but also a decline in Speed of Processing performance

46. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, most councils’ benefit services were delivered by office-based staff. However, in 2020/21, following Scottish Government advice, councils closed their offices to the general public and transitioned to delivering the benefit service remotely. Although some councils experienced initial difficulties, staff adapted quickly to remote working.

47. In 2021/22, as pandemic restrictions eased, some benefit service staff returned to office-based working, however, homeworking or hybrid working arrangements continued for the majority of staff.

48. To illustrate the increase in flexible working arrangements, [Exhibit 7](#) details the percentage of office, hybrid, and homeworkers in 2019/20 and in 2022/23 (at 31 July) for the 27 councils that provided full data.

Exhibit 7

Comparison of flexible working arrangements in council benefit services between 2019/20 and 2022/23 (at 31 July) (27 councils)

| Council | 2019/20 | | | 2022/23 (at 31 July) | | |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------|
| | Office-based | Hybrid-working | Home-working | Office-based | Hybrid-working | Home-working |
| Aberdeen City | 94% | 6% | 0% | 26% | 74% | 0% |
| Aberdeenshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Angus | 85% | 6% | 9% | 3% | 0% | 97% |
| Argyll and Bute | 100% | 0% | 0% | 3% | 0% | 97% |
| City of Edinburgh | 54% | 0% | 46% | 4% | 41% | 55% |
| Dundee City | 84% | 0% | 16% | 0% | 82% | 18% |
| East Dunbartonshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 14% | 86% | 0% |
| East Lothian | 95% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% |

| Council | 2019/20 | | | 2022/23 (at 31 July) | | |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------|
| | Office-based | Hybrid-working | Home-working | Office-based | Hybrid-working | Home-working |
| East Renfrewshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Falkirk | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Fife | 75% | 0% | 25% | 25% | 50% | 25% |
| Glasgow | 99% | 0% | 1% | 4% | 96% | 0% |
| Inverclyde | 64% | 0% | 36% | 0% | 39% | 61% |
| Midlothian | 86% | 0% | 14% | 0% | 85% | 15% |
| Moray | 75% | 25% | 0% | 15% | 60% | 25% |
| North Ayrshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| North Lanarkshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 78% | 22% |
| Orkney Islands | 100% | 0% | 0% | 23% | 77% | 0% |
| Perth and Kinross | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Renfrewshire | 95% | 0% | 5% | 0% | 95% | 5% |
| Scottish Borders | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Shetland Islands | 100% | 0% | 0% | 13% | 87% | 0% |
| South Ayrshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 4% | 96% | 0% |
| South Lanarkshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| Stirling | 100% | 0% | 0% | 16% | 0% | 84% |
| West Dunbartonshire | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 100% | 0% |
| West Lothian | 100% | 0% | 0% | 8% | 92% | 0% |

Source: Scottish Councils

49. The table above shows that in 2022/23 all 27 councils that provided full data had continued with flexible working arrangements that were in place in 2020/21, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the ratio of homeworkers and hybrid workers has varied, the ratio of office-based staff has universally declined since 2019/20, with only three councils, Aberdeen City Council, Fife Council, and Orkney Islands Council operating with more than 20 per cent of FTE office-based staff in 2022/23.

50. For many councils flexible working is relatively new, however a benefit of flexible working arrangements for some councils has been a reduction in short-term sick leave. [Exhibit 8](#) shows short-term sick leave in 2019/20, when most FTE staff were office-based, and in 2020/21 and 2021/22, when most FTE staff were working flexibly, for the 24 councils (86 per cent) that provided data.

Exhibit 8

Flexible working – Change in short-term sick leave from 2019/20 to 2021/22 (24 councils)

| Council | Short-term sick leave (days) 2019/20 | Short-term sick leave (days) 2020/21 | Short-term sick leave (days) 2021/22 |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Aberdeenshire | 275 | 231 ↓ | 347 ↑ |
| Angus | 44 | 40 ↓ | 20 ↓ |
| Argyll and Bute | 46 | 47 ↑ | 78 ↑ |
| City of Edinburgh | 730 | 560 ↓ | 163 ↓ |
| Dundee City | 219 | 97 ↓ | 250 ↑ |
| East Dunbartonshire | 83 | 33 ↓ | 44 ↑ |
| East Renfrewshire | 51 | 31 ↓ | 24 ↓ |
| Falkirk | 375 | 145 ↓ | 216 ↑ |
| Fife | 199 | 184 ↓ | 157 ↓ |
| Glasgow | 772 | 385 ↓ | 384 ↓ |
| Inverclyde | 57 | 73 ↑ | 29 ↓ |
| Midlothian | 93 | 66 ↓ | 80 ↑ |
| Moray | 102 | 30 ↓ | 24 ↓ |
| North Lanarkshire | 354 | 118 ↓ | 195 ↑ |

| Council | Short-term sick leave (days) 2019/20 | Short-term sick leave (days) 2020/21 | Short-term sick leave (days) 2021/22 |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Orkney Islands | 32 | 40 ↑ | 7 ↓ |
| Perth and Kinross | 124 | 41 ↓ | 32 ↓ |
| Renfrewshire | 5 | 151 ↑ | 286 ↑ |
| Scottish Borders | 16 | 23 ↑ | 28 ↑ |
| Shetland Islands | 77 | 50 ↓ | 36 ↓ |
| South Ayrshire | 279 | 92 ↓ | 62 ↓ |
| South Lanarkshire | 464 | 348 ↓ | 227 ↓ |
| Stirling | 63 | 12 ↓ | 28 ↑ |
| West Dunbartonshire | 43 | 52 ↑ | 137 ↑ |
| West Lothian | 135 | 116 ↓ | 186 ↑ |

Source: Scottish Councils

51. The table above shows that, when compared to 2019/20, 18 of the 24 councils (75 per cent) saw a reduction in short-term sick leave in 2020/21 of between minus eight per cent (Fife Council) and minus 81 per cent (Stirling Council). In 2021/22, 12 of the 24 councils (50 per cent) saw a continued reduction in short-term sick leave of between minus 15 per cent (Fife Council) and minus 83 per cent (Orkney Islands Council), when compared to 2020/21.

52. In total, ten councils experienced a year-on-year reduction in short-term sick leave since remote working was universally introduced in 2020/21, as a result of the Scottish Government's Covid-19 pandemic arrangements.

53. A reduction in short-term sick leave is a positive outcome for councils. However, to determine the effectiveness of flexible working on claims processing times, we compared Speed of Processing performance in 2019/20 and in 2022/23 (at 30 June).

54. [Exhibit 9](#) shows the percentage of office-based staff in 2019/20 and in 2022/23 (at 31 July) compared to councils' relative Speed of Processing performance for new claims and change events in 2019/20 and at the end of quarter one of 2022/23 (at 30 June).

Exhibit 9**Comparison of flexible working arrangements and Speed of Processing performance between 2019/20 and 2022/23 (27 councils)**

| Council | Office-based staff 2019/20 | Office-based staff 2022/23 | New claims 2019/20 (days) | New claims 2022/23 (days) | Change events 2019/20 (days) | Change events 2022/23 (days) |
|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 94% | 26% | 17 | 38 ↑ | 6 | 10 ↑ |
| Aberdeenshire | 100% | 0% | 22 | 25 ↑ | 5 | 10 ↑ |
| Angus | 85% | 3% | 13 | 21 ↑ | 3 | 8 ↑ |
| Argyll and Bute | 100% | 3% | 20 | 33 ↑ | 4 | 10 ↑ |
| City of Edinburgh | 54% | 4% | 17 | 13 ↓ | 6 | 7 ↑ |
| Dundee City | 84% | 0% | 11 | 13 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ |
| East Dunbartonshire | 100% | 14% | 20 | 22 ↑ | 5 | 5 ↔ |
| East Lothian | 95% | 0% | 22 | 30 ↑ | 3 | 10 ↑ |
| East Renfrewshire | 100% | 0% | 23 | 12 ↓ | 3 | 5 ↑ |
| Falkirk | 100% | 0% | 13 | 17 ↑ | 4 | 8 ↑ |
| Fife | 75% | 25% | 14 | 18 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ |
| Glasgow | 99% | 4% | 14 | 17 ↑ | 4 | 6 ↑ |
| Inverclyde | 64% | 0% | 14 | 20 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ |
| Midlothian | 86% | 0% | 20 | 64 ↑ | 7 | 13 ↑ |
| Moray | 75% | 15% | 20 | 18 ↓ | 4 | 5 ↑ |
| North Ayrshire | 100% | 0% | 12 | 20 ↑ | 3 | 5 ↑ |
| North Lanarkshire | 100% | 0% | 16 | 13 ↓ | 5 | 5 ↔ |
| Orkney Islands | 100% | 23% | 20 | 37 ↑ | 3 | 8 ↑ |
| Perth and Kinross | 100% | 0% | 15 | 17 ↑ | 3 | 6 ↑ |
| Renfrewshire | 95% | 0% | 18 | 39 ↑ | 4 | 10 ↑ |

| Council | Office-based staff 2019/20 | Office-based staff 2022/23 | New claims 2019/20 (days) | New claims 2022/23 (days) | Change events 2019/20 (days) | Change events 2022/23 (days) |
|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Scottish Borders | 100% | 0% | 14 | 20 ↑ | 6 | 8 ↑ |
| Shetland Islands | 100% | 13% | 23 | 14 ↓ | 4 | 6 ↑ |
| South Ayrshire | 100% | 4% | 13 | 14 ↑ | 3 | 8 ↑ |
| South Lanarkshire | 100% | 0% | 14 | 13 ↓ | 3 | 4 ↑ |
| Stirling | 100% | 16% | 16 | 28 ↑ | 3 | 8 ↑ |
| West Dunbartonshire | 100% | 0% | 24 | 25 ↑ | 5 | 4 ↓ |
| West Lothian | 100% | 8% | 14 | 16 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ |

Source: Scottish Councils and DWP

55. The table above shows that, in most councils, where there has been a reduction in FTE office-based staff, there has been a decline in new claims and change events processing performance. In 2022/23 (at 30 June), 21 of the 27 councils (78 per cent) experienced a decline in new claims processing performance, 24 of the 27 councils (89 per cent) experienced a decline in change events processing performance, and 19 of the 27 councils (70 per cent) experienced a decline in both new claims and change events processing performance, when compared to 2019/20.

56. Without further investigation we cannot determine that the decline in performance for these councils is a direct result of the decrease in FTE office-based staff. However, the analysis is concerning, and councils need to ensure that regular reviews of flexible working arrangements are carried out to monitor performance and the impact on service delivery.

Recommendation 3

To ensure that benefit services are delivering an optimum level of performance, management should regularly review flexible working arrangements to determine the impact on claims processing performance and service delivery.

3. Caseloads

57. Since Universal Credit was launched in 2013 benefit caseloads have decreased year-on-year as new claims for housing costs have been processed by the DWP. In Scotland, this has led to a 47 per cent reduction in the Housing Benefit caseload from April 2013 to July 2022.

58. Housing Benefit caseloads vary significantly across Scotland from approximately 600 at Shetland Islands Council, to approximately 53,000 at Glasgow City Council, as at April 2022. However, as detailed under [Section 1: Workloads](#), claims processing is only part of the work carried out by benefit services that can affect Speed of Processing performance. Other key factors to consider include claim complexity and the caseloads attributed to other processing work.

Caseload complexity is a factor when considering Housing Benefit claims processing performance, but there is no clear correlation

59. There are several factors that can contribute towards the complexity of a council's benefit caseload. In this section we set out the caseload split by six distinct claim types, the reasons why some claims can be more complex, and an exhibit using DWP data showing the differences in caseload complexity across the 28 councils in our study, at April 2022.

60. To illustrate caseload complexity, Audit Scotland devised a ratio based on our experience of the different customer and tenure types for Housing Benefit claims. [Exhibit 10](#) details each of the six claim types and the premise is that non-passported, private sector tenant and working age claims take on average twice as long (in days) to process and maintain than passported, social sector tenant and pension age claims.

61. The higher the complexity ratio, the potentially more complex the caseload and the longer it could be expected to take for councils to process these claims.

Exhibit 10 Description of Housing Benefit claim types

| Claim type | Description |
|------------|---|
| Passported | Individuals or households that are also in receipt of one or more of the following passported benefits are automatically entitled to Housing Benefit: |

| Claim type | Description |
|------------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income Support • Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based) • Guaranteed Pension Credit • Employment Support Allowance (Income Related) • Some Universal Credit claimants can also get Housing Benefit, and where this happens, they should be thought of as being passported. <p>This type of claim is normally quicker to process as the customer's income has been verified by the DWP.</p> |
| Non-passported | <p>These claims often require the benefit service to verify the customer's income details which can result in the need to issue a request for further information. This can lead to further delays if the information is not returned timeously, or with full details.</p> |
| Private rented sector | <p>Customers in the private rented sector are required to provide additional information in support of their claim. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • copy of the tenancy agreement • proof of rental payments • proof of household address, for example, a recent electric bill. <p>When not provided at the time of the claim, or the information provided is insufficient to assess the claim, the benefit service must contact the customer for further information.</p> |
| Social rented sector | <p>Customers living in social rented sector accommodation are not required to provide the same level of information as a private sector tenant in support of a claim, as this information can be available from other IT systems. Consequently, claims from this customer type, particularly those that are passported, can take less time to process than claims from customers in the private rented sector.</p> |
| Pension age | <p>Pension age customers are those over 66 years old, as they meet the criteria for a State Pension. Typically, claims of this type have fewer change events, as pension amounts are normally uprated annually.</p> |
| Working age | <p>Customers of working age are required to provide detailed information in support of their claim, and during the life of a claim can have numerous change events. For example, a wage increase, change of employment, or increased hours can lead to more intervention from the benefit service to verify the change than claims from customers of pension age.</p> |

62. [Exhibit 11](#) details each council's percentage of claims within the caseload that could be considered more complex, at 1 April 2022, and a complexity ratio derived from multiplying these percentages by an illustrative factor of 2.

Exhibit 11

Housing Benefit caseload by percentage of non-passported, private sector tenant and working age claims at 1 April 2022 (28 councils)

| Council | Non-passported | Private sector tenant | Working age | Complexity Ratio |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 30% | 10% | 59% | 1.98 |
| Aberdeenshire | 34% | 16% | 49% | 1.98 |
| Angus | 29% | 18% | 50% | 1.93 |
| Argyll and Bute | 25% | 19% | 49% | 1.85 |
| City of Edinburgh | 30% | 16% | 69% | 2.30 |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 25% | 21% | 50% | 1.94 |
| Dundee City | 26% | 16% | 57% | 1.97 |
| East Dunbartonshire | 29% | 18% | 56% | 2.06 |
| East Lothian | 35% | 11% | 46% | 1.84 |
| East Renfrewshire | 26% | 22% | 59% | 2.16 |
| Falkirk | 26% | 8% | 52% | 1.72 |
| Fife | 29% | 14% | 56% | 1.97 |
| Glasgow | 21% | 11% | 63% | 1.89 |
| Inverclyde | 24% | 17% | 51% | 1.85 |
| Midlothian | 31% | 12% | 53% | 1.91 |
| Moray | 30% | 18% | 51% | 1.98 |
| North Ayrshire | 24% | 17% | 52% | 1.86 |
| North Lanarkshire | 24% | 11% | 54% | 1.77 |
| Orkney Islands | 26% | 15% | 55% | 1.92 |
| Perth and Kinross | 27% | 19% | 49% | 1.91 |

| Council | Non-passported | Private sector tenant | Working age | Complexity Ratio |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Renfrewshire | 26% | 14% | 61% | 2.02 |
| Scottish Borders | 33% | 19% | 48% | 2.00 |
| Shetland Islands | 25% | 3% | 55% | 1.68 |
| South Ayrshire | 30% | 18% | 55% | 2.05 |
| South Lanarkshire | 25% | 13% | 54% | 1.84 |
| Stirling | 27% | 10% | 54% | 1.82 |
| West Dunbartonshire | 26% | 8% | 59% | 1.87 |
| West Lothian | 28% | 11% | 58% | 1.95 |

Source: DWP

63. The table above shows a wide-ranging complexity ratio of between 1.68 (Shetland Islands Council) and 2.30 (City of Edinburgh Council), which further illustrates that Speed of Processing performance based on case numbers alone is not an absolute approach.

64. When put into the context of claims processing, [Exhibit 12](#) ranks each council's Speed of Processing performance for new claims for quarter 1 of 2022/23 and details the council's relative caseload complexity ratio, ranked from the least complex (1) to the most complex (28).

Exhibit 12

Housing Benefit Speed of Processing performance for 2022/23 at 30 June (28 councils)

| Council | New claims processing (Average days) | Change events processing (Average days) | Complexity Ratio (Rank) |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| East Renfrewshire | 12 | 5 | 2.16 (27) |
| Dundee City | 13 | 4 | 1.97 (18) |
| South Lanarkshire | 13 | 4 | 1.84 (5) |
| North Lanarkshire | 13 | 5 | 1.77 (3) |
| City of Edinburgh | 13 | 7 | 2.30 (28) |

| Council | New claims processing (Average days) | Change events processing (Average days) | Complexity Ratio (Rank) |
|-----------------------|---|--|----------------------------|
| Shetland Islands | 14 | 6 | 1.68 (1) |
| South Ayrshire | 14 | 8 | 2.05 (25) |
| West Lothian | 16 | 4 | 1.95 (17) |
| Glasgow | 17 | 6 | 1.89 (11) |
| Perth and Kinross | 17 | 6 | 1.91 (12) |
| Falkirk | 17 | 8 | 1.72 (2) |
| Fife | 18 | 4 | 1.97 (18) |
| Moray | 18 | 5 | 1.98 (20) |
| Inverclyde | 20 | 4 | 1.85 (7) |
| North Ayrshire | 20 | 5 | 1.86 (9) |
| Scottish Borders | 20 | 8 | 2.00 (23) |
| Angus | 21 | 8 | 1.93 (15) |
| East Dunbartonshire | 22 | 5 | 2.06 (26) |
| West Dunbartonshire | 25 | 4 | 1.87 (10) |
| Aberdeenshire | 25 | 10 | 1.98 (20) |
| Stirling | 28 | 8 | 1.82 (4) |
| East Lothian | 30 | 10 | 1.84 (5) |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 32 | 5 | 1.94 (16) |
| Argyll and Bute | 33 | 10 | 1.85 (7) |
| Orkney Islands | 37 | 8 | 1.92 (14) |
| Aberdeen City | 38 | 10 | 1.98 (20) |
| Renfrewshire | 39 | 10 | 2.02 (24) |
| Midlothian | 64 | 13 | 1.91 (12) |

Source: DWP

65. This table shows contrasting performance when looking at the complexity ratio in isolation. The council with the least complex caseload (Shetland Islands) performed 6th out of the 28 councils for new claims processing, while the council with the most complex caseload (City of Edinburgh) performed 5th, better than could be expected based on its caseload complexity ratio alone.

66. Although the complexity ratio is one example of a different approach to assessing the impact of a council's caseload when considering Speed of Processing performance, it highlights that some councils have more complex caseloads under management and that, in isolation, these are not directly comparable.

The increased caseload from processing other assessments impacts on councils' Speed of Processing performance

67. As detailed within [Section 1: Workloads](#), many councils have adapted their benefit service to carry out other financial assessments as legacy Housing Benefit caseloads have reduced year-on-year. Despite accounting for a proportion of the service's resource, and potentially having an impact on the Speed of Processing indicator, this other work is not considered when assessing claims processing performance.

68. As with Housing Benefit claims, there are several factors that can impact on the resource available to deliver the benefit service's core Housing Benefit activities as a result of processing other assessment types. These are:

- the number of applications received
- the average time taken to process each application.

69. The average time taken to process each application type was not within the scope of this study. However, councils were asked to provide caseload data for each additional assessment type carried out from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July).

70. [Exhibit 13](#) details the total number of assessments carried out each year for the 25 councils (89 per cent) that provided full data and includes Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction new claims and additional workloads, including workloads arising from processing Covid-19 support grants from 2020/21 onwards.

71. The table excludes the number of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction change events carried out as these include system generated changes recorded as taking one day and including them could skew the volume of work that benefit service staff carry out.

Exhibit 13**Total benefit service workload 2019/20 to 2022/23 (25 councils)**

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 9,820 | 32,049 | 17,689 | 5,724 |
| Aberdeenshire | 34,997 | 56,961 | 68,760 | 30,903 |
| Angus | 16,483 | 64,266 | 56,372 | 64,172 |
| Argyll and Bute | 7,110 | 7,527 | 16,917 | 2,871 |
| City of Edinburgh | 38,523 | 180,028 | 174,429 | 43,697 |
| Dundee City | 23,062 | 28,878 | 154,998 | 41,407 |
| East Dunbartonshire | 4,785 | 7,913 | 12,234 | 4,309 |
| East Renfrewshire | 2,968 | 4,460 | 14,583 | 1,976 |
| Falkirk | 17,604 | 32,055 | 51,241 | 18,947 |
| Fife | 43,277 | 121,455 | 114,397 | 39,126 |
| Glasgow City | 54,833 | 73,309 | 79,788 | 31,541 |
| Inverclyde | 3,585 | 6,076 | 13,401 | 10,785 |
| Moray | 9,442 | 13,351 | 23,118 | 7,429 |
| North Ayrshire | 8,586 | 11,066 | 11,168 | 4,209 |
| North Lanarkshire | 49,112 | 64,309 | 81,739 | 52,572 |
| Orkney Islands | 1,221 | 3,066 | 3,299 | 9,379 |
| Perth and Kinross | 3,012 | 5,693 | 4,264 | 1,628 |
| Renfrewshire | 33,624 | 35,745 | 42,932 | 12,675 |
| Scottish Borders | 6,436 | 17,348 | 16,136 | 9,432 |
| Shetland Islands | 1,229 | 1,032 | 1,207 | 645 |
| South Ayrshire | 18,543 | 21,536 | 33,884 | 11,641 |
| South Lanarkshire | 62,588 | 102,209 | 168,750 | 161,309 |
| Stirling | 6,655 | 13,932 | 28,916 | 12,379 |

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| West Dunbartonshire | 15,126 | 15,626 | 26,601 | 11,890 |
| West Lothian | 42,921 | 72,892 | 102,655 | 44,284 |

Source: Scottish councils

72. The table above shows that Shetland Islands Council was the only council that did not experience an increase in benefit service workload in 2020/21. The average caseload increase was 89 per cent, ranging from minus 16 per cent (Shetland Islands) to 367 per cent (City of Edinburgh), with seven councils' caseloads more than doubling that of the previous year.

73. As the number of new Housing Benefit claims had decreased by approximately 11 per cent in 2020/21, to determine if the increased workload was a direct result of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, we calculated the percentage of Covid-19 support assessments carried out in 2020/21, relative to the overall workload.

74. In 13 of the 25 councils (52 per cent), Covid-19 support assessments accounted for less than ten per cent of the overall workload. However, in the other 12 councils (48 per cent) they accounted for between 17 per cent (North Lanarkshire, East Dunbartonshire) and 77 per cent (City of Edinburgh) of all assessments carried out.

75. This shows that some councils were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 pandemic related work. Our analysis found that six councils' benefit services did not process any Covid-19 support payments in 2020/21, and that 11 only processed one support payment. The remaining eight benefit services administered between two and six support schemes (City of Edinburgh Council). This would account, in part, for the disparity in increased workloads.

76. To provide a meaningful comparison of workloads across Scottish councils, [Exhibit 14](#) below shows the number of assessments per average FTE officer for the period 2019/20 to 2022/23.

Exhibit 14

Number of assessments per FTE benefit service staff (average) for the period 2019/20 to 2022/23 (at 31 July)

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 230 | 811 | 529 | 197 |
| Aberdeenshire | 613 | 982 | 1,127 | 498 |

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| Angus | 488 | 1,977 | 1,762 | 1,945 |
| Argyll and Bute | 264 | 282 | 652 | 116 |
| City of Edinburgh | 396 | 1,921 | 1,849 | 489 |
| Dundee City | 398 | 536 | 3,020 | 824 |
| East Dunbartonshire | 177 | 293 | 471 | 166 |
| East Renfrewshire | 187 | 264 | 889 | 133 |
| Falkirk | 536 | 985 | 1,639 | 615 |
| Fife | 805 | 2,544 | 2,600 | 889 |
| Glasgow City | 355 | 485 | 556 | 230 |
| Inverclyde | 254 | 510 | 1,158 | 953 |
| Moray | 490 | 722 | 1,274 | 412 |
| North Ayrshire | 313 | 425 | 452 | 174 |
| North Lanarkshire | 1,124 | 1,489 | 1,893 | 1,232 |
| Orkney Islands | 349 | 767 | 943 | 3,126 |
| Perth and Kinross | 126 | 245 | 192 | 76 |
| Renfrewshire | 610 | 672 | 1,012 | 318 |
| Scottish Borders | 805 | 1,983 | 1,793 | 1,048 |
| Shetland Islands | 195 | 167 | 205 | 110 |
| South Ayrshire | 373 | 471 | 807 | 281 |
| South Lanarkshire | 605 | 1,003 | 1,691 | 1,671 |
| Stirling | 261 | 576 | 1,228 | 546 |
| West Dunbartonshire | 1,043 | 1,157 | 2,217 | 1,012 |
| West Lothian | 1,240 | 2,426 | 3,361 | 1,450 |

Source: Scottish councils

77. When comparing workloads per average FTE staff member, the differences are significant. For example, in 2020/21, officers in Aberdeen City Council processed approximately 811 items of work, while officers in Fife Council processed 2,544 items of work during the year.

78. To illustrate the effect that workloads had on Speed of Processing performance in 2020/21, six of the seven councils (86 per cent) with a total workload increase of more than 100 per cent experienced a decline in new claims processing performance of between an average of one day (Stirling Council) and an average of nine days (Aberdeen City Council).

79. The volume of work per FTE officer further demonstrates the difficulty in comparing councils based solely on new claims and change events processing times. A more holistic approach, taking account of the factors detailed in this report, provides a better understanding of benefit service performance.

4. Call handling and personal callers

There is insufficient detail recorded on the time taken to deal with telephone calls and personal callers

80. Historically, benefit officers have been responsible for dealing with all aspects of a Housing Benefit claim, from receiving and assessing an application, to dealing with telephone enquiries and engaging with customers at public offices.

81. As council services have become more streamlined, front-line customer engagement has increasingly been carried out by customer services staff trained to deal with basic Housing Benefit enquiries. This approach was designed to provide benefit officers with more time to process claims.

82. To understand the effect that dealing with customers directly has on available processing resources, we asked councils to provide data where the benefit service was primarily responsible for answering benefit-related telephone calls and personally engaging with customers at council offices.

Call handling

83. In 13 of the 28 councils (46 per cent) in our study, benefit officers were responsible for dealing with telephone enquiries. However, only four councils (31 per cent) were able to provide full data for 2021/22 on the number of calls received and the average length of each call, as detailed in [Exhibit 15](#) below.

Exhibit 15

Telephone calls handled by the benefit service in 2021/22

| Council | Number of calls | Average length of call (seconds) | Total (hrs) | % of avg. FTE in post |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Aberdeenshire | 27,336 | 420 | 3,189 | 3.0% |
| East Dunbartonshire | 26,456 | 362 | 2,660 | 6.4% |
| Orkney Islands | 1,743 | 194 | 94 | 1.7% |
| Perth and Kinross | 5,657 | 450 | 660 | 1.9% |

Source: Scottish councils

84. The table above shows the impact on benefit service resources in councils that are responsible for handling telephone calls. For example, in 2021/22 the time taken to deal with telephone calls in East Dunbartonshire Council equated to approximately 1.5 FTE officers.

Personal callers

85. Where the benefit service was responsible for dealing with personal callers, ten of the 28 councils in our study (36 per cent) utilised benefit officers to carry out this work. However, only Falkirk Council was able to provide full data for 2021/22 on the time taken to manage this activity, as detailed in the [Case study](#) below.

Case study – Falkirk Council

In 2021/22, Falkirk Council's benefit service dealt with 1,218 personal callers, with an average visit of 14 minutes*. Proportionately, this equates to approximately 426 hours of benefit officer resource, or 0.8 per cent of the benefit service's average FTE staff during the year.

Source: Falkirk Council

* Council buildings re-opened to the public on 9 August 2021

86. Detailed information on resources, including non-processing time dealing with telephone calls and personal callers, is important when assessing the impact on the resource available to the benefit service to carry out core Housing Benefit claims processing activities.

87. It is disappointing that only four of the 13 councils (31 per cent) where the benefit service handled telephone calls, and only one of the ten councils (ten per cent) where the benefit service dealt with personal callers could provide full data for analysis.

88. Despite this, the limited data available does suggest that this aspect of the work of the benefit service is relevant when assessing Speed of Processing performance.

Recommendation 4

When benefit services are primarily responsible for call handling and/or dealing with personal callers, complete and accurate data should be recorded to allow management to assess the impact on resources and the time taken to process Housing Benefit claims.

5. Speed of processing

The work of the benefit service needs to be considered holistically to get a better understanding of performance

89. The average time taken to process new claims and change events, the Speed of Processing indicator, has been used by the DWP since 2011 as the key indicator of a council's claims processing performance, and is published quarterly on its website.

90. As detailed in this report, the indicator is used by Audit Scotland as part of its risk assessment process to identify councils suitable for a Housing Benefit performance audit.

91. [Exhibit 16](#) details claim processing performance in Scotland from 2020/21 to 2022/23 (at 30 June) for new claims and change events.

Exhibit 16

New claims and change events processing performance for the period 2020/21 to 2022/23 (28 councils)

| Council | New 2020/21 | New 2021/22 | New 2022/23 (at 30 June) | Changes 2020/21 | Changes 2021/22 | Changes 2022/23 (at 30 June) |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 26 | 18 ↓ | 38 ↑ | 5 | 8 ↑ | 10 ↑ |
| Aberdeenshire | 28 | 24 ↓ | 25 ↑ | 6 | 6 ↔ | 10 ↑ |
| Angus | 17 | 15 ↓ | 21 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ | 8 ↑ |
| Argyll and Bute | 20 | 25 ↑ | 33 ↑ | 3 | 5 ↑ | 10 ↑ |
| City of Edinburgh | 17 | 15 ↓ | 13 ↓ | 4 | 5 ↑ | 7 ↑ |
| Dumfries and Galloway | 16 | 21 ↑ | 32 ↑ | 2 | 3 ↑ | 5 ↑ |
| Dundee City | 12 | 13 ↑ | 13 ↔ | 2 | 3 ↑ | 4 ↑ |
| East Dunbartonshire | 15 | 19 ↑ | 22 ↑ | 4 | 4 ↔ | 5 ↑ |

| Council | New 2020/21 | New 2021/22 | New 2022/23 (at 30 June) | Changes 2020/21 | Changes 2021/22 | Changes 2022/23 (at 30 June) |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| East Lothian | 21 | 30 ↑ | 30 ↔ | 6 | 6 ↔ | 10 ↑ |
| East Renfrewshire | * | 43 ↑ | 12 ↓ | * | 23 ↑ | 5 ↓ |
| Falkirk | 14 | 12 ↓ | 17 ↑ | 4 | 4 ↔ | 8 ↑ |
| Fife | 20 | 32 ↑ | 18 ↓ | 3 | 5 ↑ | 4 ↓ |
| Glasgow City | 22 | 18 ↓ | 17 ↓ | 5 | 6 ↑ | 6 ↓ |
| Inverclyde | 11 | 15 ↑ | 20 ↑ | 2 | 2 ↔ | 4 ↑ |
| Midlothian | 20 | 36 ↑ | 64 ↑ | 5 | 12 ↑ | 13 ↑ |
| Moray | 20 | 19 ↓ | 18 ↓ | 3 | 4 ↑ | 5 ↑ |
| North Ayrshire | 12 | 13 ↑ | 20 ↑ | 2 | 3 ↑ | 5 ↑ |
| North Lanarkshire | 14 | 13 ↓ | 13 ↔ | 4 | 4 ↔ | 5 ↑ |
| Orkney Islands | 26 | 28 ↑ | 37 ↑ | 3 | 3 ↔ | 8 ↑ |
| Perth and Kinross | 15 | 17 ↑ | 17 ↔ | 3 | 4 ↑ | 6 ↑ |
| Renfrewshire | 16 | 21 ↑ | 39 ↑ | 4 | 7 ↑ | 10 ↑ |
| Scottish Borders | 18 | 18 ↔ | 20 ↑ | 5 | 5 ↔ | 8 ↑ |
| Shetland Islands | * | 15 ↑ | 14 ↓ | 4 | 4 ↔ | 6 ↑ |
| South Ayrshire | 13 | 13 ↔ | 14 ↑ | 2 | 3 ↑ | 8 ↑ |
| South Lanarkshire | 12 | 12 ↔ | 13 ↑ | 2 | 2 ↔ | 4 ↑ |
| Stirling | 17 | 25 ↑ | 28 ↑ | 3 | 4 ↑ | 8 ↑ |
| West Dunbartonshire | 19 | 25 ↑ | 25 ↔ | 3 | 4 ↑ | 4 ↔ |
| West Lothian | 11 | 13 ↑ | 16 ↑ | 3 | 3 ↔ | 4 ↑ |

Source: DWP

* Data not available.

92. When considering a council for a Housing Benefit performance audit in 2021/22, based on Speed of Processing performance alone, Audit Scotland would consider Fife Council and Midlothian Council, as these councils had the greatest decline in new claims processing performance. Based on the findings in this report, the inclusion of these other factors will help provide context around the causes for a decline in performance and help refine the Accounts Commission's approach to the Housing Benefit performance audit process.

93. A more holistic approach ensures that Housing Benefit performance audits are focused on specific reasons for under-performance and enables the Accounts Commission to understand and work in partnership with councils to learn lessons, share best practice and improve the customer experience.

Councils are being innovative and sharing areas of good practice to support wider improvement

94. As technology improves, benefit services are adopting new ways of working to deliver a more efficient and effective service. As part of this study, we asked councils to provide examples of good practice in managing resources that had helped deliver improvements to the delivery of the benefit service and the customer experience.

95. Our analysis of the responses found some common themes, including the use of automation to relieve the benefit service of recurring administrative tasks. [Exhibit 17](#) highlights some areas of good practice reported by councils with full details provided at [Appendix 3](#).

Exhibit 17

Examples of good practice employed by councils

| Council | Description | Improvement |
|---------------|---|--|
| Aberdeenshire | Customer call-back - To manage the volume of calls to customer advisor teams, a call-back appointment system was created using Microsoft Bookings. This facilitated the booking of a 10-minute appointment for a general enquiry, or a 30-minute appointment with the benefit service if the customer needed help when applying for Housing Benefit/ Council Tax Reduction or a discretionary housing payment. | A reduction in the volume of calls being passed to the benefit service and improved customer expectations, as call backs were carried out within 24 hours, at a time suitable to the customer. |

| Council | Description | Improvement |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Dundee City | Automation - The benefit delivery team are introducing automation in areas such as Universal Credit and Council Tax changes, for example, when customers are applying for discounts and exemptions. | The benefit delivery team is working collaboratively with other council service areas to pay ongoing cost of living support payments to vulnerable customers, without the need to contact them for payment information. |
| Glasgow City | Automation - In 2019/20, the council increased its use of automation, making best use of data shared by the DWP by, for example, automatically matching DWP data to Housing Benefit/Council Tax records to create an 'action task' where assessment is required. | This has assisted the service in maintaining Speed of Processing performance. |
| Renfrewshire | Robotics - The use of robotics to support the high volume of notifications from the DWP was introduced to support processing. | Benefit staff can focus on processing more complex claims. |
| South Lanarkshire | SMS Quick Chat - The council introduced 'SMS quick chat' within the benefit and revenues call centre which allows the call handler to send the customer an SMS containing a direct link to the appropriate online form during the call. | A reduction in the number of requests for customer assistance with respect to the claim application process. |

Source: Scottish councils

96. The benefits from working innovatively are leading to reported improvements to service delivery and customer experience. To ensure that all councils are aware of these benefits, good practice should continue to be shared across the local authority community.

6. Recommendations

| Issue | Recommendation |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Operating below complement</p> <p>Operating the benefit service below complement can place additional pressures on staff that can lead to increased absences, and a decline in performance levels.</p> | <p>Where the benefit service is operating below complement, councils should investigate the reasons for this and seek to address the shortfall, with a view to improving service delivery and claims processing performance.</p> <p>Paragraph 28.</p> |
| <p>2. Absence levels</p> <p>If staff resources are not closely monitored, and contingency arrangements are not in place, unexpected staff shortages can impact on the level of service being provided to customers.</p> | <p>Councils should investigate the reasons for sickness absence levels that are above the national average and have sufficient contingency arrangements in place to manage unexpected staff shortages.</p> <p>Paragraph 44.</p> |
| <p>3. Flexible working</p> <p>In most councils, an increase in the number of staff with flexible working arrangements correlates with a decline in claims processing performance in 2022/23 (at 31 July).</p> | <p>To ensure that benefit services are delivering an optimum level of performance, management should regularly review flexible working arrangements to determine the impact on claims processing performance and service delivery.</p> <p>Paragraph 56.</p> |
| <p>4. Call handling and personal callers</p> <p>There is insufficient detail recorded where benefit services are dealing with telephone calls and personal callers.</p> | <p>When benefit services are primarily responsible for call handling and/or dealing with personal callers, complete and accurate data should be recorded to allow management to assess the impact on resources and the time taken to process Housing Benefit claims.</p> <p>Paragraph 88.</p> |

Appendix 1

Additional processing activities in 2022/23 (at 31 July)

| Council | Processing activities |
|------------------------------|---|
| Aberdeen City | Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (2) |
| Aberdeenshire | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Money Advice, Blue Badge Scheme, Local Discretionary Scheme, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Flexible Food Fund (10) |
| Angus | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Free School Meals (Direct Payments), Cost of Living Award, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (10) |
| Argyll and Bute | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Flexible Food Fund (4) |
| City of Edinburgh | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, School Closure Holiday Payments, Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme (7) |
| Dumfries and Galloway | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (7) |
| Dundee City | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Holiday Support Payments (5) |
| East Dunbartonshire | School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (5) |
| East Lothian | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (3) |
| East Renfrewshire | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (3) |

| Council | Processing activities |
|--------------------------|--|
| Falkirk | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (6) |
| Fife | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments (6) |
| Glasgow City | Discretionary Housing Payments (1) |
| Inverclyde | Cost of Living Award (1) |
| Midlothian | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (3) |
| Moray | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (7) |
| North Ayrshire | Discretionary Housing Payments (1) |
| North Lanarkshire | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Blue Badge Scheme (5) |
| Orkney Islands | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Cost of Living Award, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Covid19 Low-income Pandemic Payments (5) |
| Perth and Kinross | (0) |
| Renfrewshire | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (5) |
| Scottish Borders | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), Free School Meals (Direct Payments), School Clothing Grants (4) |
| Shetland Islands | Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (3) |
| South Ayrshire | Free School Meals, School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (5) |

| Council | Processing activities |
|----------------------------|--|
| South Lanarkshire | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Blue Badge Scheme, Cost of Living Award, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (9) |
| Stirling | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments (5) |
| West Dunbartonshire | Free School Meals, School Clothing Grants, Discretionary Housing Payments (3) |
| West Lothian | Free School Meals, Scottish Child Payment (Bridging Payment), School Clothing Grants, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Education Maintenance Allowance, Social Work Financial Assessments, Covid-19 Self-isolation Support Payments, Free School Meals (Direct Payments), Winter Support Fund (10) |

Source: Scottish councils

Appendix 2

Staff resources

This table shows average Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing levels in Scottish council benefit services from 2019/20 to 2022/23, determined by the average of the number of FTE staff in post at the beginning and end of each financial year, and at 31 July 2022 for 2022/23.

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|----------|-------------------------|
| Aberdeen City | 42.75 | 39.52 ↓ | 33.45 ↓ | 29.05 ↓ |
| Aberdeenshire | 57.10 | 58.00 ↑ | 61.00 ↑ | 62.00 ↑ |
| Angus | 33.75 | 32.50 ↓ | 32.00 ↓ | 33.00 ↑ |
| Argyll and Bute | 26.95 | 26.70 ↓ | 25.95 ↓ | 24.85 ↓ |
| City of Edinburgh | 97.30 | 93.70 ↓ | 94.35 ↑ | 89.45 ↓ |
| Dumfries and Galloway | * | * | * | * |
| Dundee City | 57.95 | 53.92 ↓ | 51.33 ↓ | 50.28 ↓ |
| East Dunbartonshire | 27.00 | 27.00 ↔ | 26.00 ↓ | 26.00 ↔ |
| East Lothian | 19.10 | 18.60 ↓ | 19.15 ↑ | 19.70 ↑ |
| East Renfrewshire | 15.90 | 16.90 ↑ | 16.40 ↓ | 14.90 ↓ |
| Falkirk | 32.84 | 32.54 ↓ | 31.27 ↓ | 30.80 ↓ |
| Fife | 53.75 | 47.75 ↓ | 44.00 ↓ | 44.00 ↔ |
| Glasgow City | 154.65 | 151.00 ↓ | 143.42 ↓ | 136.98 ↓ |
| Inverclyde | 14.13 | 11.91 ↓ | 11.57 ↓ | 11.32 ↓ |
| Midlothian | 22.00 | 22.00 ↔ | 21.50 ↓ | 21.00 ↓ |
| Moray | 19.25 | 18.50 ↓ | 18.15 ↓ | 18.05 ↓ |
| North Ayrshire | 27.40 | 26.05 ↓ | 24.70 ↓ | 24.20 ↓ |
| North Lanarkshire | 43.68 | 43.18 ↓ | 43.18 ↔ | 42.68 ↓ |
| Orkney Islands | 3.50 | 4.00 ↑ | 3.50 ↓ | 3.00 ↓ |

| Council | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 (at 31 July) |
|---------------------|---------|----------|---------|-------------------------|
| Perth and Kinross | 24.00 | 23.25 ↓ | 22.25 ↓ | 21.50 ↓ |
| Renfrewshire | 55.10 | 53.20 ↓ | 42.44 ↓ | 39.88 ↓ |
| Scottish Borders | 8.00 | 8.75 ↑ | 9.00 ↑ | 9.00 ↔ |
| Shetland Islands | 6.32 | 6.17 ↓ | 5.89 ↓ | 5.89 ↔ |
| South Ayrshire | 49.75 | 45.75 ↓ | 42.00 ↓ | 41.50 ↓ |
| South Lanarkshire | 103.50 | 101.87 ↓ | 99.82 ↓ | 96.51 ↓ |
| Stirling | 25.51 | 24.19 ↓ | 23.54 ↓ | 22.68 ↓ |
| West Dunbartonshire | 14.50 | 13.50 ↓ | 12.00 ↓ | 11.75 ↓ |
| West Lothian | 34.60 | 30.04 ↓ | 30.54 ↑ | 30.54 ↔ |

Source: Scottish councils

*Data not available

Appendix 3

Good practice

This table provides a summary of good practice that councils advise has helped improve the delivery of the benefit service and the customer experience.

| Council | Good practice |
|---------------|--|
| Aberdeenshire | <p>The Council developed a 'Ranked Activity Matrix' that identified activities that could be reduced or suspended to allow staff to be redeployed to critical activities, for example, dealing with a sudden and prolonged increase in self-isolation grants.</p> <p>The council made effective use of Microsoft Office to create online application forms to aid the gathering of information for Reviews, Discretionary Housing Payments, Change of Address and Housing Benefit on Two Homes, and to create forms to deal with the latest items of work that arose because of the pandemic.</p> <p>To manage the volume of calls to customer advisor teams, a call-back appointment system was created using Microsoft Bookings. This allowed the teams to book a 10-minute appointment for a general enquiry, or a 30-minute appointment with the benefit service if the customer needed help to apply for Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction/Discretionary Housing Payment.</p> <p>This reduced the volume of calls being passed to the benefit service, and helped improve customer expectations, as call backs were done within 24 hours, at a time suitable to the customer.</p> <p>To manage processing times when resources were limited and applications were higher during the pandemic, the council's five 'area-based' teams of varied sizes were split into four even sized virtual teams, allowing the council to dedicate two of these teams to dealing solely with all aspects of a new claim.</p> <p>Pre-pandemic, processors had specific areas of responsibility and, although all had a working knowledge of the Scottish Welfare Fund, the increase in applications impacted on the time taken to process Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction claims. To help mitigate this, the council employed temporary staff to help deal with the increase in Scottish Welfare fund applications, which has helped improve the council's new claims processing times and provided greater resilience for the service to cope with other areas of work.</p> |

| Council | Good practice |
|----------------------------|---|
| <p>Dundee City</p> | <p>The benefit delivery team are introducing automation in areas such as Universal Credit and Council Tax changes, for example, when applying discount and exemptions.</p> <p>The team has designed and implemented processes by working collaboratively with other council service areas to efficiently pay ongoing cost of living support payments to those most vulnerable, without the need to contact customers for payment information.</p> <p>The team has also engaged with other council teams to ensure that we are utilising their strengths to the benefit service's advantage.</p> |
| <p>Falkirk</p> | <p>Robotics introduced during 2021 to relieve some of the simpler tasks from benefit administration teams.</p> |
| <p>Fife</p> | <p>The benefit service has been paperless for several years and, pre-pandemic, moved to a paperless mail system. Instead of staff resource being used to print, envelope, and post letters, an external print service is utilised.</p> |
| <p>Glasgow City</p> | <p>In 2019/20, the council increased its use of automation, making best use of data shared by the DWP by, for example, automatically matching DWP data to Housing Benefit/Council Tax records to create an 'action task' where assessment is required. This has assisted the service in maintaining Speed of Processing performance.</p> <p>In 2020/21, instead of issuing letters, processing teams were provided with mobile phones and asked to contact customers by phone or email if information was required to assess a claim. This form of engagement has helped to speed up processing.</p> <p>The council introduced a call-back service in July 2021, where the customer creates an appointment online and a subject matter expert from the benefit service contacts the customer at a time that suits them.</p> <p>Changes have been made to decision letter templates to make them more user friendly and easier to understand. This has reduced the need for customers to contact the council for an explanation.</p> |
| <p>Inverclyde</p> | <p>The council has increased the level of flexible working from 36 per cent to 100 per cent which has virtually eliminated short-term sickness absence.</p> <p>Contact by email, telephone, and text is being used more to request and remind customers of evidence/information that is required.</p> <p>The council utilises an external print service to print and post monthly</p> |

| Council | Good practice |
|--------------------------|--|
| | payment schedules, freeing up staff that were previously used to carry out this task. |
| Moray | The council recruited a temporary staff member to specifically deal with a clerical aspect of the Self-isolation Support Grant application, which allowed experienced staff to focus on the award process and make more decisions. |
| North Ayrshire | <p>As part of the council's 'Push with Digital' strategy, an electronic Discretionary Housing Payment form was purchased in March 2020, and enhancements were carried out to the existing electronic Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction claim form.</p> <p>In October 2021, the council automated the DWP Universal Credit Data Feed, and now approximately 50-60 per cent of these transactions are automated. In October 2022, the council created a new post specifically to look at the development of existing systems with a view to identifying service improvements that can lead to time and resource savings.</p> |
| Perth and Kinross | <p>In 2019/20, the council's 'Print & Post' solution enabled statutory notifications to be sent digitally to a remote print and post location for issue via mail. Along with email, this has removed reliance on the 'office' to control and manage the issue of documentation.</p> <p>The council has well established online services, and the benefit service has introduced more online forms and processes and continues to evolve in this area. Customers can access the service 24/7 though online channels, and this has resulted in a reduction in face-to-face customer contact.</p> <p>In 202/21, the service recognised the need to review system parameters and processes around Universal Credit data feeds, which resulted in improved automation, and a more streamlined approach for Council Tax Reduction claims.</p> |
| Renfrewshire | <p>The use of robotics to support the high volume of notifications from the DWP was introduced to support processing, allowing benefit processing staff to focus on more complex cases.</p> <p>Scottish Welfare Fund calls are now handled by Scottish Welfare Fund decision makers rather than customer service advisers, allowing for a quicker decision-making process for the customer. This has had a positive impact on processing times for Crisis Grant applications.</p> <p>'IQ Post me' was introduced to allow benefit staff to have the capability to issue letters to customers remotely.</p> <p>Digital Forms were created to allow customers to apply online for Council Tax Reduction and Discretionary Housing Payments.</p> |

| Council | Good practice |
|----------------------------|---|
| | <p>Staff wellbeing one to ones are conducted on multiple occasions to ensure staff had adequate equipment, and to see how they were coping, with a focus on their mental health/wellbeing. The benefits to this are believed to be improved attendance levels and improved processing times.</p> <p>New workload and resource analyst role developed and recently recruited, who will undertake in depth workload planning and trend analysis linked to resource and performance monitoring.</p> |
| Shetland Islands | <p>The council introduced a workflow system, prior to this the council used a paper-based filing system. The introduction of permanent hybrid working has resulted in reduced sick leave.</p> |
| South Lanarkshire | <p>The council has introduced several online forms across the service to ensure key information is supplied, including name and address, which is often missed. This has reduced staff time spent on dealing with enquiries, reduced the requests for further information from the customer, and ensured that enquiries are assigned into the correct workflow for action. This has been positive as processing times have remained largely within timescales across the service as staff resources continue to reduce.</p> <p>The council has increased automation over the years, particularly within Council Tax Reduction and Universal Credit changes. Since 2019/20, automation levels in this area have increased from 69 per cent to 80 per cent.</p> <p>The introduction of 'SMS quick chat' within the benefit and revenues call centre allows call handlers to send a text message containing a direct link to the appropriate online form during the call. This has reduced the number of requests for assistance with the application processes.</p> <p>Internal workflow changes for Blue Badge applications have allowed the council to identify and prioritise vulnerable cases. This has enabled the roll out of Blue Badge processing within the processing centre, resulting in improved processing times, and reduced the need for customer contact.</p> <p>The type of calls being handled by the benefit and revenues call centre has increased over the last 18 months to include queries in respect of Housing Benefit overpayments, Education Benefits, and Blue Badges. This has allowed staff dealing these applications more time to focus on decision making.</p> |
| West Dunbartonshire | <p>The council has introduced robotics in the areas of Free School Meals, Clothing Grants and Discretionary Housing Payments, and is considering extending this to other areas within revenues and benefits.</p> |

| Council | Good practice |
|---------------------|--|
| | Robotics has allowed for significant reductions in basic processing, reduced admin, and improved service delivery. |
| West Lothian | <p>Since April 2019, the council has contracted an external partner to provide trained and experienced Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction processors and can react quickly to increased demand for the service, or any short-term resource challenges.</p> <p>In March 2021, the service developed automation, and a robotic solution to support the delivery of Education Benefits, which has improved efficiency and accuracy of delivery.</p> |

Source: Scottish councils

Resourcing the benefit service

A thematic study

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