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News release

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Aberdeenshire Council's benefits service requires closer scrutiny

In a report on the performance of Aberdeenshire Council's benefits service, the Accounts Commission says that the council took insufficient action to address risks identified during audit work, with delays in implementing agreed actions.

The Commission says the council has recently made some improvements but needs to do more to ensure that robust arrangements and oversight are in place and the quality of service improves.

Today's findings are based on a report highlighting matters arising from an audit of the council's housing and council tax benefit processing service. During an earlier audit in autumn 2008, Audit Scotland identified 12 risks and the council agreed actions to deal with them. However at a second audit two years later the auditors considered that the council still had not fully implemented nine of the agreed actions. Further risks were also identified at this point.

Today's report says that the service should have been more proactively scrutinised by councillors. However it wasn't until June 2011 that a report on service performance including the auditors' assessment of risk was taken to a council committee.

Chair of the Accounts Commission John Baillie said: "There has been insufficient action within the council to address matters arising from the initial audit. Senior managers must do more to ensure action is taken within agreed timescales. Councillors need to ensure they receive better information on service performance and use that information to scrutinise the performance of services such as housing benefits, and to hold senior managers to account."

The council has been consistently slower than the national average in processing new claims.

The report acknowledges that improvements have been made recently including a revised business plan and performance reporting measures, speedier processing of new claims and the introduction of plans to review interventions activities.

However the Commission also notes that the welfare reforms proposed by the Westminster government will have a significant impact on council services throughout Scotland. It says Aberdeenshire will need robust systems to deal effectively with this.

The Commission has asked for a follow up report in about 12 months' time, so it can review progress.

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Notes to editors

1. Today's findings are based on the statutory report from the Controller of Audit to the Accounts Commission, which was considered at the Accounts Commission's public meeting on 14 July 2011. A statutory report is the means by which the Controller of Audit highlights audit issues to the Accounts Commission.
2. In 2008 the Accounts Commission assumed the DWP's Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's responsibility for reporting on the performance of housing benefit services in Scotland. This work forms part of the local audit work carried out at each council.
3. Housing benefit audits are based on a review by Audit Scotland of a risk assessment, based on the council's own self assessment. The council is then given the opportunity to address identified risks by producing an improvement

plan with actions and completion dates. A second stage focused audit, resulting in a statutory report by the Controller of Audit, is only carried out if authorities are unable or unwilling to reduce these risks to an acceptable level. Aberdeenshire Council is the first council to have had a second stage audit.

4. The Accounts Commission for Scotland checks whether local authorities, fire & rescue services and police boards spend public money properly and effectively. For more information about the Accounts Commission see <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/about/ac/>
5. Audit Scotland provides services to the Accounts Commission for Scotland and carries out work as directed by the Accounts Commission. Its reports are available at <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/>