



**Internal Audit Report**

Corporate Services

**Review of Unified Benefits**

March 2009

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## 5 MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 The broad objective of the audit was to ensure that procedures and processes were in place to ensure that the benefits on the Council systems Comino and I: World are properly:

- Administered;
- Assessed;
- Payments are accurate; and
- Overpayments are identified, collected and corrected.

Walk through and sample testing revealed that the control exercised by Unified Benefits is substantial with no financial errors found. The only issue found by the audit team was that Comino and I World were difficult to interrogate, whilst trying to locate sampling data. Northgate is currently being updated which should make the system easier to interrogate by auditors.

5.2 The audit reviewed through visiting all Service Points. Internal Audit identified that there was scope for the further development of the service for the customer.

5.3 The audit findings outlined in this report provide management the opportunity to further enhance controls and operational efficiency relational to benefits. This will lead to faster determination of benefit entitlement for the customer and greater performance achievement for the Council.

5.4 Specific areas identified by the audit that can directly impact on performance and improve customer service are:

- There is a need to introduce a Service Level Agreement (SLA) setting out the activities and responsibilities of Service Point staff. Resolution is the responsibility of the Revenues and Benefits Manager, Customer Services Manager, and Area Corporate Services Management;
- In some areas back and Front Offices have different locations and when linked with a lack of clarity in responsibilities and tasks for each office this has led to a drop in performance;
- Visits by Internal Audit to Service Points revealed that there was a varied level of uptake regarding E-Benefits by claimants. Internal Audit believes that if E-Benefits were championed this would lead to improved performance, less administration and a better service for the customer in earlier receipt of their benefits.
- It was noted by Internal Audit at the Service Points that, incomplete documentation is being handed in by claimants to the Front Offices staff. This means that the e-Benefits application

cannot be completed and the application goes into the Ordinary stream for further follow up by staff and eventually the Back Office staff. The net effect is the denigration of the Councils national performance indicators.

- It was noted that Service Point lunchtime closure times varied across Argyll and Bute with some closing for an hour during the day whilst others remained open. There should be a common policy regarding opening times thus improving customer access.
- It was noted from Internal Audit visits to Service Points, libraries, community centres, and Jobcentre Plus offices that, there was an absence of information leaflets regarding benefits and contact numbers.

#### 5.5 Internal Audit also identified weaknesses relating to security of claimant information

- It was noted from Internal Audit visits to Service Points that claimants were not always asked for proof of identity when making benefits enquiries.
- Registers of Interests were either absent or not being kept up-to-date.

**APPENDIX 2 ACTION PLAN**

No.	FINDINGS	PRIORITY	RECOMMENDATION	RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	IMPLEMENTATION DATE
1	The roles and responsibilities for the duties of Back/Front office staff are not clear in regards to processing benefits	Medium	<b>Service Level Agreement to be drafted for Unified Benefits and put forward to Senior Management for approval and implementation.</b>	Revenues and Benefit Manager	31 July 2009
2	There were difficulties found when Front and Back office staff are located in separate buildings	Medium	<b>Where possible Front and Back office staff should be located in the same premises. This is dependent on Office Rationalisation process.</b>	Head of ICT & Financial Services & Head of Democratic Services and Governance	31 December 2009
3	E-Benefits have a poor uptake rate. Certain areas seem disillusioned with performing e-Benefits.	Medium	<b>Only e-Benefits' should be permitted for new applications, paper applications should only be processed as a last resort.</b>	Revenues and Benefits Manager/Customer Service Centre Manager/ Area Corporate Service Managers	31 March 2010
4	Libraries and other council premises were found to have no information on benefits and were unaware of where to send potential claimants.	Low	<b>Leaflets to be distributed to all areas, to improve claimant awareness.</b>	Revenues and Benefits Manager	31 March 2010

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5	In some areas, personal information regarding benefits is being released without seeking confirmation of the enquirer's identity. This is a direct breach of the Data Protection Act 1998.	High	<b>Service Point staff should be informed/ reminded of the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.</b>	Customer Services Centre Manager	Immediate
6	Service Point staff have not signed an annual declaration form (Register of Interests) indicating friends and family members when dealing with their benefit claims.	Medium	<b>Back Office staff have signed a declaration form during the process of this audit; a similar declaration should be completed by Service Point staff.</b>	Customer Service Centre Manager	30 <sup>th</sup> June 2009
7	Back Office staff are receiving telephone and written queries because they are putting their contact details on correspondence to claimants.	Medium	<b>All documentation issued by the Benefits staff should direct claimants to the Customer Service Centre in the first instance. This has been applied during the course of the audit.</b>	Revenues and Benefits Manager	Implemented
8	There is not always suitable accommodation available for discussing claims confidentially.	Medium	<b>This may be difficult to implement due to lack of space but management should endeavour to make alternative facilities available.</b>	Head of Democratic Services and Governance / Head of ICT and Financial Services	To be provided for all appointments by 30 Sept 2009

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<b>9</b>	Lunch time closure of Service Points is not standardised across areas. Some close at 1-2pm while others remain open.	Low	<b>Area Service Points should be staffed at all times.</b>	Head of Democratic Services and Governance	31 December 2009