



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

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Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service Review

Gwynedd Council

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Status of report

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The person who delivered the work was Lisa Williams.

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Summary report

1. The administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit (H&CTB) has a significant impact on citizens, including vulnerable groups and requires significant interaction with a large number and range of vulnerable customers. It is important that the service is operated effectively and efficiently in order to meet their needs.
2. Poorly performing H&CTB services can impact negatively on a council's performance in customer service generally and more specifically in the context of its wider anti-poverty strategies. They can put barriers in the way of people returning to paid employment, prevent financial help getting to those who need it most and thereby cause additional hardship.
3. Expenditure on H&CTB accounts for a significant proportion of a council's gross revenue expenditure. Although most of this is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), poor administration can result in a direct financial loss to the Council through reduced subsidy on any benefit that has been overpaid.
4. The H&CTB Improvement Assessment (2010-11) was discussed with officers of Gwynedd Council (the Council) in early February 2012. At that time the Council told us about several changes that had been made to the service since our previous visit and this report focuses on those changes.
5. This review sought to answer the question: 'Are the Council's arrangements for delivering its Housing and Council Tax Benefit Services likely to lead to improvement'? Our review concluded that **'The good progress made in most aspects of the delivery of housing and council tax benefit services should help the Council manage the scale of change anticipated in the next few years'. We have concluded this because:**
 - good progress has been made to improve claims administration processes;
 - security arrangements are likely to prevent fraud and error;
 - backlogs in requests for appeals and reconsiderations have reduced and plans to strengthen management information are being developed;
 - good progress has been made to develop performance management for the H&CTB Service although the arrangements rely heavily on a very small number of staff; and
 - there has been no consultation with service users in order to evaluate whether the service meets their needs.
6. Our findings, conclusions, and proposals for improvement are outlined in the following table.

High-level questions and findings

High Level Question	Are the Council's arrangements for delivering its Housing and Council Tax Benefit Services likely to lead to improvement?
High Level Answer: We have concluded that:	The good progress made in most aspects of the delivery of H&CTB services should help the Council manage the scale of change anticipated in the next few years.
Are recent changes to claims administration processes likely to lead to improvements?	Good progress has been made to improve claims administration processes.
Are security arrangements likely to prevent fraud and error and help manage the level of overpaid debt?	Security arrangements are likely to prevent fraud and error.
Is the service effectively addressing delays in responding to customer requests for reconsiderations and appeals?	Backlogs in requests for appeals and reconsiderations have reduced and plans to strengthen management information are being developed.
Are there systems in place for the effective management of performance and costs?	Good progress has been made to develop performance management for the H&CTB Service although the arrangements rely heavily on a very small number of staff.
Are the views of service users evaluated?	There has been no consultation with service users in order to evaluate whether the service meets their needs.

High Level Question	Are the Council's arrangements for delivering its Housing and Council Tax Benefit Services likely to lead to improvement?
Proposals for Improvement	P1 Ensure that effective succession planning arrangements are in place for the Quality Assurance and Training Officer (QA and T Officer) post.
	P2 Ensure that all staff are aware of business continuity arrangements contained in the disaster recovery plan.
	P3 Ensure that the transfer of the delivery of take-up activities from the Council to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) does not impact negatively on citizen engagement.
	P4 Consider introducing a process of consultation or survey to evaluate the customer's view about the service.



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