Questionnaire to Scottish local authorities on impact of welfare reforms on 2014/15 and 2015/16 spending plans and resources

As part of our scrutiny of local government budgets the Local Government and Regeneration Committee is seeking the following information from your council on the financial and resource impact of UK Government welfare reforms, for the period 2012/13 to 2014/15—

Q1 – In what areas of (a) work and (b) costs and resources has the ongoing programme of UK welfare reforms affected your council?

a) Workload
   • Additional software testing and implementation
   • Development of staff and stakeholder training (incorporating multi levels/roles of staff)
   • Regular meetings, working groups, conferences
   • Multiple notifications (letters, leaflets, visits, telephone calls) to customers of specific changes affecting them personally
   • Changes to council website and redevelopment of forms, letters, training materials, procedures etc
   • Increase in enquiries from customers, landlords and partner organisations.
   • Changes to staffing structures, change management plans, recruitment, support and development of staff taking on services new to the council
   • Develop working relationships with new partners (eg food banks, credit unions etc) and learning how these services operate and develop integration with council services.
   • Budget and performance management and completion of statistical returns
   • Procurement of services and contract management
   • Strategic consultations, reporting to committee, high level awareness,
   • Forward planning for Local Support Services Framework, potential restructuring of services, closer/regular working relationships with key partners on a case by case basis.
   • Increasing demands for early intervention advice on money matters; e.g. budgeting. This need is identified through Scottish Welfare fund applications, or council tax arrears. A temporary post (SLAB funded) has been created within the Revenues service to provide this advice and assistance.
   • The welfare benefits team are experiencing increasing demand for assistance with medically related benefits - both initial claims and reconsiderations / appeals. The service has appointed a temporary claims officer (SLAB funded) to deal with the increased demand.
   • The council’s money advice service are seeing more clients with very little or no income or assets. This has changed the profile of debt solutions available to clients, with fewer able to use the statutory Debt Arrangement Scheme or voluntary debt payment plans and more having to seek token payments / moratoria, or sit in a bankruptcy ‘limbo’ where no creditors are willing to take action to initiate bankruptcy because the client has no assets. These are temporary solutions and require additional ongoing input from money advisers to maintain them. The service is also seeing more clients in crisis situations. This requires additional officer time to assist clients to resolve the crises e.g. making applications to food banks and arranging delivery.
b) Costs

- Additional costs have been incurred as a result of resources required to implement the above additional workloads.
- Additional costs in respect of ongoing workload from Scottish Welfare Fund and increase in Discretionary Housing Payments and increase in enquiries generally in respect of welfare reforms, particularly in respect of under occupancy HB restrictions.
- Travel and accommodation costs associated with attending meetings, training and conferences.
- One-off project costs of £74,000 to establish the welfare benefits advice network referred to in response to Q4 below.

Q2 – What was the level of actual or budgeted crisis grants made by your council in the period 2012/13 to 2014/15? What percentage increase/decrease did this represent over the previous three financial years?

Moray council paid out £105,000 on SWF crisis grants during 2013/14.

Q3 – What has been the financial and resource implication of the welfare reforms for your social work and housing services in the period 2013/14 to 2014/15? What has been the level of emergency housing applications your council has dealt with in 2013/14? What level do you expect to deal with in 2014/15?

Q4 – What actions has your council taken to coordinate its efforts and responses to the welfare reform changes to ensure the most needy/vulnerable people in you council area receive the support and assistance they require?

The housing service have made direct contact with all council tenants affected by the changes with a view to working with householders to understand the options open to them, such as house swaps and financial support through Discretionary Housing Payments.

The council’s Corporate Director (Corporate Resources) chairs the Local Delivery Group which involves relevant officers from the council, DWP, CAB and tsiMoray. This group has coordinated training for and awareness raising amongst partners and also reports to the council’s policy and resources committee and the community planning board as and when required. The group has been successful in obtaining additional external funding and is also involved in sharing best practice with other areas.

The Local Delivery Group is developing a welfare benefits advice network. The project will cost £74,000 to implement and has 4 strands, as follows:

1. A network of support services relevant to welfare reforms.
2. Create a welfare benefits ‘portal’ giving information on and access to support services.
3. Publicity and marketing on support services.
4. Loan laptops for voluntary agencies to assist clients with online skills and online access.