

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – case work processing

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) funding supports children and young people with additional needs throughout their education, and is administered by the SEND team within the Council.

Recent concerns raised by parents of young people in need of funding with regards to the time lapse between application and final decision, prompted two audit reviews; an external review, which was reported publicly in September 2019 and an internal review by the Council's Internal Audit Service.

The Internal Audit review included an end to end examination of SEND casework processing, this commenced at the point when Bristol City Council (BCC) receives a request for assessment through to the conclusion of this process. The purpose of this exercise was to understand the workflow and to identify pinch points that are preventing the statutory requirement of 20 weeks to process cases being met.

Based on the completion of the fieldwork, a **Limited Assurance** audit opinion was assigned. This current level of assurance is reflective of the management actions that were agreed during the review, including the approval of additional funding. The key findings identified during the review were as follows:

- At the time of the review it was found that none of the cases that were being processed were scheduled to be completed within the 20 week statutory period
- Backlogs were found to exist in all of the areas that make up the SEND case work processing activities, the backlog was not manageable
- Management Information that would assist in establishing resourcing levels required to produce an effective process flow was not available
- There were no arrangements in place to effectively manage telephone traffic
- The computer system used for processing SEND casework was not fully functional; resulting in manual records having to be produced for reporting purposes, a duplication of effort
- Team member skill sets had not been formally documented in order to facilitate potential resource redeployment to areas with identified backlogs
- Unsatisfactory implementation of the new Liquid Logic Computer System has resulted in limited functionality and concerns about the quality of the data that had been migrated.

Internal Audit recognised that recovery from the position identified would need extensive investment in terms of both capacity and resources. The findings and management actions required were agreed with SEND management.

Homelessness – Short-Term Lettings

The objective of the review was to provide an independent opinion on whether funds available for providing Temporary Accommodation [TA] from non-Council resources are maximised. In particular, to ensure effective collection of contributions due from TA occupiers and the associated arrears recovery processes.

Specifically, the review covered the internal controls surrounding whether funds available for providing TA from non-Council resources were maximised. In particular, to ensure effective collection of contributions due from TA occupiers and the associated arrears recovery processes.

Based on the completion of the fieldwork, a **Limited Assurance** audit opinion was assigned. The key findings identified during the review were as follows:

- Data from Shelter shows Bristol's demand for TA had increased by 67% to around 500 since 2014; the number of children in TA had more than doubled in the same time to around 800. Current TA processes were no longer sufficient for managing the cohort and demand
- TA properties cost £7m pa to lease from external providers and attracted £5.3m in Housing Benefit paid directly to the Council; leaving £1.7m to recover from the TA occupier
- After allowing for payments and adjustments, £1,060k of value was not being proactively managed
- In the 12 months to 31 August 2019, £462k remained due and uncollected from TA occupiers, representing 52% of TA occupier contributions charged in the period
- Overall, there was £716k uncollected from all TA occupiers on Civica Cx, representing 81% of annual TA contributions
- Housing Benefit credit balances of £103k were identified; these may have been due to posting errors or overpayments that will need to be repaid
- Frequent adjustments recorded on Civica Cx left doubt over the accuracy TA occupier account balances.

The audit findings and management actions required were agreed with Housing Services management.

Housing Stock Management – Responsive Repairs

The objective of the review was to provide an independent opinion on whether procedures and controls were in place to effectively manage and monitor the responsive repairs budget and to ensure that the job costs were accurately recorded and accounted for.

In line with best practice a risk-based approach was taken, involving documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of internal controls and governance in managing the risks associated with responsive repairs.

Based on the completion of the fieldwork, a **Limited Assurance** audit opinion was assigned. The key findings identified during the review were as follows:

- The new management system, Civica Cx, required old repairs to be purged and Masterfile details to be updated particularly for tenant contact details
- Accurate repairs pricing was frustrated by historic recharging and mixed sources of data for reporting purposes
- More opportunity needed to be made to benchmark performance with other social housing providers
- Future tendering activity needs to be balanced to not only be driven by price
- Formal complaints were low at less than 1% of tenancies per year.

The audit findings and management actions required were agreed with Housing Services management.

Housing Stock – Rent Collection and Arrears Recovery

The objective of the review was to provide an independent opinion on whether procedures and controls were in place to effectively manage and monitor the rent collection and arrears recovery processes.

In line with best practice a risk-based approach was taken, involving documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of internal controls and governance in managing the risks associated with rent collection and arrears recovery.

Based on the completion of the fieldwork, a **Limited Assurance** audit opinion was assigned. This should be seen in the context that six of the eight key findings were already known to Housing Services Management in advance of the review.

The key findings identified during the review were as follows:

- Arrears between 30th October 2018 and 30th June 2019 had increased by 6.60% [£565k] to £9,134k net
- The account balances were stratified into relevant bands; excluding credit balances, £12.388k was owed, around 11% of the annual rental income for 2018-19
- There was no Rent Collection and Arrears Recovery Policy; to progress an arrears case officers rely on the Pre-Action Protocols issued by the Ministry of Justice
- Critical to managing arrears is prompt and regular reporting, but current reporting was generated through a data warehouse legacy system recording prior spot balances and transactions
- Rent accounts were open to manipulation and fraud because there were no restrictions or authorisation limits for account adjustments in Civica Cx
- There were concerns about the application of direct debits as a method of payment; collecting the wrong amount or when no longer due
- There were no periodic reconciliations carried out to ensure the rent control accounts in ABW agree with the new housing management system
- There were no exception reports that will be a useful tool for housing advisers managing rent collections and arrears.

The audit findings and management actions required were agreed with Housing Services management.