

# Certification of claims and returns annual report 2013-14

South Bucks District Council

5 January 2015

Ernst & Young LLP



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5 January 2015

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Dear Members

## **Certification of claims and returns annual report 2013-14 South Bucks District Council**

We are pleased to report on our certification work. This report summarises the results of our work on South Bucks District Council's 2013-14 claims and returns.

### **Scope of work**

Local authorities claim large sums of public money in grants and subsidies from central government and other grant-paying bodies and must complete returns providing financial information to government departments. In some cases these grant-paying bodies and government departments require appropriately qualified auditors to certify the claims and returns submitted to them.

Under section 28 of the Audit Commission Act 1998, the Audit Commission may, at the request of authorities, make arrangements for certifying claims and returns because scheme terms and conditions include a certification requirement. When such arrangements are made, certification instructions issued by the Audit Commission to appointed auditors of the audited body set out the work they must undertake before issuing certificates and the submission deadlines.

Certification work is not an audit. It involves executing prescribed tests designed to give reasonable assurance that claims and returns are fairly stated and in accordance with specified terms and conditions.

In 2013-14, the Audit Commission did not ask auditors to certify individual claims and returns below £125,000. The threshold below which auditors undertook only limited tests remained at £500,000. Above this threshold, certification work took account of the audited body's overall control environment for preparing the claim or return. The exception was the housing and council tax benefits subsidy claim where the grant paying department set the level of testing.

Where auditors agree it is necessary, audited bodies can amend a claim or return. An auditor's certificate may also refer to a qualification letter where there is disagreement or uncertainty, or the audited body does not comply with scheme terms and conditions.

### **Statement of responsibilities**

In March 2013 the Audit Commission issued a revised version of the 'Statement of responsibilities of grant-paying bodies, authorities, the Audit Commission and appointed auditors in relation to claims and returns' (statement of responsibilities). It is available from the Chief Executive of each audited body and the Audit Commission website.

The statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between the Audit Commission's appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas.

This annual certification report is prepared in the context of the statement of responsibilities. It is addressed to those charged with governance and is prepared for the sole use of the audited body. As appointed auditor we take no responsibility to any third party.

### **Summary**

Section 1 of this report outlines the results of our 2013-14 certification work and highlights the significant issues.

We checked and certified one claim, for housing benefit subsidy (value £15,452,220). We met the submission deadline. We issued a qualification letters for the claim: details of the qualification matters are included in section 1. Our certification work found errors which the Council corrected. The amendments reduced the subsidy by £2,512.

Fees for certification work are summarised in section 2. The indicative fees for 2013-14 are based on final 2011-12 certification fees, reflecting the amount of work required by the auditor to certify the claims and returns in that year. Fees for schemes no longer requiring certification have been removed, and the fees for certification of housing benefit subsidy claims have been reduced by 12 per cent. This is to reflect the removal of council tax benefit from the scheme.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of this report with you at the 15 January Audit Committee.

Yours faithfully

**Maria Grindley**  
Director  
Ernst & Young LLP  
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## 1. Summary of 2013-14 certification work

We certified one claim in 2013-14. Our main findings are shown below.

### Housing benefits subsidy claim

Scope of work	Results
Value of claim presented for certification	£15,454,732
Limited or full review	Full
Amended	Amended – subsidy reduced by £2,512
Qualification letter	Yes
Fee – 2013-14	£22,957 (proposed: see section 2)
Fee – 2012-13	£31,659

Findings in 2012-13:	Findings in 2013-14
- incorrect child tax credit income	Non-dependant errors: 9 cases of overpayment where the DWP could claw back £12,800 based on our extrapolation
- incorrect eligible rent	
- misapplication of Rent Officer determination	Incorrect partner private pensions: as only a small number of cases, 100% check done and the claim has been amended
- incorrect award of backdated benefit	Incorrect application of one-off working tax credit. No effect on subsidy
- incorrect application of private/occupational pensions	Incorrect service charges. Maximum potential impact from extrapolation is DWP “clawback” of £355
- misclassification of eligible and technical overpayments	War disablement and war widows’ pensions: as only a small number of cases, 100% check done and the claim has been amended
- misclassification of local authority error overpayments	

Councils run the Government’s housing benefits scheme for tenants. Councils responsible for the scheme claim subsidies from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) towards the cost of benefits paid.

The certification guidance requires auditors to complete more extensive ‘40+’ or extended testing if initial testing identifies errors in the calculation of benefit or compilation of the claim. We found errors and carried out extended testing in several areas.

Extended and other testing identified errors which the Council amended. They had a small net impact on the claim. We have reported underpayments, uncertainties and the extrapolated value of other errors in a qualification letter. The DWP then decides whether to ask the Council to carry out further work to quantify the error or to claw back the benefit subsidy paid. These are the main issues we reported to them:

### Testing of the initial sample identified:

- Errors in non-HRA cases led to 100% testing for which the claim has been amended

- one case where the Council incorrectly classified expenditure as backdated, with no impact on subsidy
- one case where an error occurred in prior year eligible overpayments due to insufficient evidence to enable underlying entitlement to be applied, resulting in an understatement
- one case where the Council misclassified an extended payment, the failure to recognise the qualifying conditions led to an understatement
- one case where the Council had underpaid benefit due to incorrectly including non-dependent in the subsidy calculation
- one case where the Council incorrectly calculated partner private pension resulting in overpaid benefit
- one case where the Council had underpaid benefit as a result of incorrectly applying working tax credit
- one case where the Council had underpaid benefit due to using incorrect service charges, this resulted in underpaid benefit

Our extended testing, and the potential impact, is summarised in the table above.

We were satisfied that some errors could only result in underpayments; officers have agreed our findings in these cases but we do not need to report them in detail to DWP.

We did not carry out additional testing on benefits follow-up work resulting from previous qualification letters as these issues did not arise again in 2013-14.

The net impact of all amendments on the claim was to reduce subsidy by £2,512.

## 2. 2013-14 certification fees

From 2012-13 the Audit Commission replaced the previous schedule of maximum hourly rates with a composite indicative fee for certification work for each body. The indicative fees for 2013-14 are based on actual certification fees for 2011-12, reflecting the amount of work required by the auditor to certify the relevant claims and returns in that year. There was also a 40 per cent reduction in fees reflecting the outcome of the Audit Commission procurement for external audit services.

The 2013-14 fee for certification of housing benefit subsidy claims has been reduced from the indicative fee by a further 12% to reflect the removal of council tax benefit from the scheme.

Claim or return	2012-13	2013-14	2013-14
	Actual fee £	Indicative fee £	Proposed fee £
Housing benefits subsidy claim	31,659	29,832	22,957
National non-domestic rates return	2,656	N/A	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>34,315</b>	<b>29,832</b>	<b>22,957</b>

### Notes:

1. The 2013-14 fee for certification of housing benefit subsidy claims has been reduced from the indicative fee by a further 12% (from £33,900 to £29,832) to reflect the removal of council tax benefit from the scheme. We reported this in our annual audit letter. We propose to reduce the fee further, to £22,957, to reflect the fact that we needed to do significantly less work than in 2011-12, the base year for setting the scale fee. Our proposed fee is currently with the Audit Commission for their approval.
2. the NNDR return was not subject to audit from 2013-14 onwards: however, as in previous years we gained assurance from this work for our opinion, we had to carry out extra work on the opinion audit to cover this. There was an additional fee of £900.

### 3. Looking forward

For 2014-15, the Audit Commission has calculated indicative certification fees based on the latest available information on actual certification fees for 2012-13, adjusted for any schemes that no longer require certification.

The Council's indicative certification fee for 2014-15 is £27,860. The actual certification fee may be higher or lower if we need to undertake more or less work than in 2012-13 on individual claims or returns.

We must seek the agreement of the Audit Commission to any proposed variations to indicative certification fees. The Audit Commission expects variations from the indicative fee to occur only where issues arise that are significantly different from those identified and reflected in the 2012-13 fee.

DCLG and HM Treasury are working with grant-paying bodies to develop assurance arrangements for certifying claims and returns following the closure of the Commission (due April 2015).

The Audit Commission currently expects that auditors will continue to certify local authority claims for housing benefit subsidy from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the arrangements developed by the Commission. The DWP has asked the Commission to prepare the auditor guidance for 2014/15. Arrangements for 2015/16 onwards are to be confirmed, but DWP envisages that auditor certification will be needed until 2016/17, when Universal Credit is expected to replace housing benefit.

The Audit Commission has changed its instructions to allow appointed auditors to act as reporting accountants where the Commission has not made, or does not intend to make, certification arrangements. This removes the previous restriction saying that the appointed auditor cannot act if the Commission has declined to make arrangements. This is to help with the transition to new certification arrangements, such as those introduced for the Teachers' Pensions return for 2013-14.



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