



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting:	DWP Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group
Date:	04 December 2013
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	<p>DWP: Clare Elliott(Chair), Bill Hern, Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Huw Meredith, Jon Hobson, Mel Frankham, Gill Haizelden, Danielle Wells, Laura Smethhurst, Manny Ibiayo</p> <p>Observer: Nahim Khan</p> <p>DCLG: Danielle Houghton, Margaret Uhure</p> <p>GLA: Deborah Halling</p> <p>LAAs: Rose Doran Valerie Pearce, Ben Dixon, Pat Durkin, Steve Carey, David Graaff, Lesley Pigott, Peter Meehan, John Rosenbloom</p>
Apologies:	Howard Mason, Andrew Stevens, John Swinnerton, John Rosenbloom, Andrew Parfitt, Matthew Evans, Colin Wallbank
<p>1. Welcome and Introductions:</p> <p>DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in. DWP welcomed Deborah Halling from the GLA.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>Matters Arising</p> <p>Minutes</p> <p>The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.</p> <p>Mont Goldman corrected the item on the DCLG update to read that future uprating for pensioners will be in line with HB.</p> <p>Action Points</p> <p>The action points from the November meeting were cleared.</p> <p>3. Updates:</p> <p>Fraud and Error Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)</p>	

DWP informed the meeting that the tranche 2 pilots went live on 25 November.

DWP went on to say that there is an intention to set up a working group to look at areas such as data sharing and joint working in respect of prosecutions, to examine legal aspects of what data can and cannot be shared. LAAs suggested that the working group should encompass wider representation than fraud investigators. DWP noted the point adding that the Devolved Administrations and DCLG will also be represented.

LAAs asked about the timetable and criteria for roll out. DWP explained that a high level planning announcement is expected soon and following the announcement a meeting will be convened to discuss the options. This meeting should take place early in the calendar new year and will give regard to the requirement for a six month lead-in.

Benefit Cap

DWP highlighted that:

- Tranches 1 and 2 had been delivered within the agreed timescale.
- Details of the Judicial Review had been set out in a recent HB Bulletin.
- Stakeholders had been consulted regarding lessons learned and questionnaires had been issued to LA Revenues and Benefits Managers and to the Steering Group.
- The benefit cap official statistics release will be published on the .gov.uk website on 05 December.
- A draft circular on dual claims in different LAs has been issued to Practitioner Operations Group (POG) for their comments and the project is currently working through the responses.
- Planning is currently underway regarding the handover to Business as Usual, which is anticipated for the end of January/beginning of February.

The Steering Group asked about DHPs and whether the specific component for the benefit cap from this year's allocation will be retained for next year.

DCLG asked whether the responses to the lessons learned questionnaires will be collated and issued to the Steering Group.

Key messages from the lessons learned exercise should be available from mid-January 2014.

DWP asked for clarity around the core business requirements for Jobcentre Plus and what DWP is commissioning from Jobcentre Plus to support how benefit capped households will be helped into employment. .

An action point was taken for the Benefit Cap project to provide clarity around the core business requirements for Jobcentre Plus and what DWP is commissioning from Jobcentre Plus.

Access to Benefits for Migrants

DWP explained that the intention was to give the Steering Group advance notice of proposed changes to access to benefits for migrants from the European Economic Area (EEA), following the article written by the Prime Minister which appeared in the Financial Times on 27 November.

There are a number of proposed changes:

- i) EEA jobseekers (who are currently “passported” through to HB when they claim JSA) will not be entitled to claim Housing Benefit. This will not affect Retained Workers i.e. those people who have been in work and become involuntarily unemployed. There is no implementation date for this measure and engagement with the LAAs will take place as the policy develops.
- ii) Jobseekers from the EEA will be required to wait for three months before they can get JSA.
- iii) Migrants from the EEA and Retained Workers will be subject to a new assessment for JSA after six months with the presumption being that they no longer have a genuine prospect of work unless they can demonstrate otherwise. This will be a discussion item for the January Steering Group.
- iv) Regarding the issue of meaningful work, an earnings threshold will be introduced to assess whether or not a claimant is a Retained Worker and for those falling below the threshold a full assessment of their employment status will take place. .

The LAAs pointed out that for planning purposes, LAs will need to know the timescales for these changes as soon as possible.

DCLG

With regard to appeals, LAAs pointed out that there was still an expectation amongst local authorities of a significant increase in applications to DWP for attachment to benefits.

An action point was taken for DWP to check and establish the number of applications to DWP for attachment to benefits.

LAAs asked whether the default schemes for LCTS would adopt the streamlined approach taken under UC. DCLG responded that there will be no default scheme for year 2, as all schemes will be locally owned from that point onwards.

UC/Transition Working Group (TWG) Update

UC

DWP advised the meeting that the first tranche of official statistics to 30 September for the pathfinder, (Ashton Under Lyne, Wigan, Oldham and Warrington) have been published on the GOV.UK website.

DWP went on to say that a claimant evaluation survey was published on the GOV.UK website.

DWP updated the meeting on the figures for on-line claiming.

With regard the percentage that had claimed on-line, the LAAs queried the percentage of 'assisted' claims.

TWG

DWP updated the Steering Group on the TWG meeting of 27 November, highlighting:

- A discussion around the implications for the levels of service expected from LAs from the announcement regarding Pension Credit.
- A discussion around the view that introducing the housing element in UC on an incremental basis, i.e. at a later stage in the migration, could help lower risk.
- The new IT build resulting from the Pitchford Review will address passported benefits.
- The meeting was informed about the financial products that are under consideration.
- LA representatives pointed out that moving from a rent rebate system to direct payments to claimants could be a costly change for LAs.
- A discussion around the work ongoing to prepare claimants for UC and concern around claimants' readiness for transition.

The LAAs voiced concern around the pensioner caseload, and in particular LAs requirement to maintain HB until 2020. DWP pointed out that this work would continue to be covered by HB subsidy.

4. Direct Payment Demonstration Projects

DWP introduced the discussion item, giving the meeting an indication of the payment performance figures which are largely in line with those in May, with no significant increase in arrears.

A Landlord Consideration document which will help landlords prepare for the changes to direct payments is in preparation and will be issued in January 2014.

Separate evaluation is being carried out by Sheffield Hallam University. The next key report will be an analysis of the rent accounts for direct payment tenants for the first 12 months of the projects. The report will also include analysis of a comparative sample of tenants whose Housing Benefit was been paid to their landlord over the same period.

The projects will close in March 2014, and all learning will be gathered and consolidated into a final Project learning report. The final Sheffield Hallam University external evaluation report, covering the full 18 months of the Demonstration Projects, is expected in summer 2014 and should be published around autumn 2014.

The Learning Network is due to close in March 2014 and discussions on whether it

should continue beyond March are ongoing. LAAs pointed out that the decision should be contingent on announcements regarding the UC roll out as learning could become meaningful for longer.

An internal structured learning process is taking place to get a 'sense check' on learning gathered by the Projects.

Once the Sheffield Hallam report on 12 month rent accounts is available it will be shared with the Steering Group.

LAAs queried the lessons for the administration of UC, particularly around decisions made by LAs to exempt claimants from direct payment on migration to UC. DWP pointed out that there are some constraints on the projects which mean they are unable to fully replicate conditions under UC, adding that it is intended to identify the support needs for claimants and feed these into the Local Service Support Framework.

The meeting discussed the need for clarity around data sharing between landlords and DWP.

5. AOB

LAAs raised an issue around the perceived fragmentation of the customer journey to ESA.

Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Thursday 16 January 2014, Room 6.03 Caxton House; start time of 14.30.

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