



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting:	DWP Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group
Date:	16 January 2014
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	<p>DWP: Andrew Parfitt (Chair), Clare Elliott, Bill Hern, Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Huw Meredith, Mel Frankham, Manny Ibiayo, Andrew Curphey, Dean Blower, Jenita Chelva, Anne Brown, Beverley Walsh, Satish Parmar, Samuel Higley, Anne Cairns</p> <p>Dial – in: Phil Mercer, Gregg Harrison, Sylvia Haslehurst</p> <p>Observer: Diane Lavery</p> <p>DCLG: Rob Leach, Margaret Uhure</p> <p>LAAs: Rose Doran, Ben Dixon, Pat Durkin, Andrew Stevens, Howard Mason, Matthew Evans, Colin Wallbank, Jennifer Wynter</p> <p>Dial – in: Peter Meehan, John Gibbs.</p>
Apologies:	Lesley Pigott, Steve Carey, Valerie Pearce, David Graaff John Swinnerton, John Rosenbloom

1. Welcome and Introductions:

DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in.

Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

Action Points

AP December 01 was cleared.

AP December 02 has been carried forward.

AP December 03: DWP explained that the numbers of applications for Attachment to Benefits appeared to be under control. DWP asked the Steering Group to consider any intelligence of anticipated volumes. LAAs pointed out that the Council Tax Support caseload could provide a spike in April and May.

DWP will be issuing a questionnaire to LA Revenues and Benefits Managers.

3. Updates:

DHP Bidding Process

DWP updated the meeting:

- the additional funding of £20 million for DHPs was set up in the autumn of 2013
- the closing date for bids is 03 February 2014
- thus far 60 bids have been received with 40 receiving awards
- a decision on the remaining 20 bids is expected for mid February, and expressions of interest indicate a further 20 bids will be received
- Ministers are required to sign off for each bid on a monthly basis

DWP confirmed that the bids could not be carried forward. The LAAs noted that the bidding had been a complex process and that LAs had not been able to respond quickly.

Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (RSRS)

An issue has arisen which means that working-age social sector housing benefit tenants are not subject to the RSRS if they have been in the same property since 1 January 1996 and have also been continuously in receipt of HB since that date. Regulations are being drafted to close this loophole; in summary:

- draft regulations have been sent to LAs.
- the agenda has been set by the Secretary of State for these amended regulations to be in force by 03 March 2014
- as a consequence DWP has asked for responses by 30 January as the regulations will need to be laid the following week to avoid breaching the 21 day rule.
- DWP will attend SSAC on 30 January

Steering Group members agreed to respond with comments by 30 January.

LAAs were concerned that trawling for cases to identify affected parties would be time consuming and resource intensive. Most LAs retain records for the current year and the previous six years. They asked whether DWP could discuss with audit bodies to see what is reasonable and agree some common ground.

Fraud and Error Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)

DWP explained that the Autumn Statement announcement confirmed the implementation of SFIS as a single organisation within DWP.

- a working group will be set up with DCLG and LA representatives to look at issues around joint working, data sharing and to identify any new legislative requirements
- an implementation planning meeting with the devolved administrations and Security Operations Group (SOG) will take place on 24 January

- the outcomes from the planning meeting will be shared with the Steering Group
- main roll out is planned for October 2014 – March 2016
- following agreement on the plans, a letter will be issued to all LA Chief Executives. A draft of this letter will be shared with the Steering Group
- some additional information will be required from LAs, such as contact details for their HR Business Partners
- DCLG have announced additional funding for tackling corporate fraud.

PSN

The LAAs raised a query around Criminal Record checks and the existing Baseline Personnel Security Standard. They asked for clarification on whether retrospective checks are required for existing LA staff.

An action point was taken for DWP to contact Cabinet Office for clarification on whether retrospective checks are required for existing LA staff.

An action point was taken for DWP to check and clarify how its Impact Level 3 data will be issued and whether this will entail the use of encryption.

Benefit Cap

DWP updated the meeting.

- the project will formally close on February 20th
- it will be handed over to live running at the end of January
- named contacts and a generic email will be set up
- an item will be included in the February G Bulletin
- statistics will be published on the .gov.uk website
- the project is currently working through dual cases and colleagues in Belfast are sending the cases through to LAs.

LAAs referred the meeting to a possible reduction of the benefit cap. He agreed to send details to officials working on the benefit cap.

The LAAs asked whether DWP had any estimates for numbers resulting from uprating.

DCLG

Localising council tax support

DCLG highlighted the following key messages:

- the final Prescribed requirements had been published and included the figures

for the uprated amounts of pensioner allowances, premia and deductions and other minor amendments to maintain consistency with the Housing Benefit Regulations

- the Annex regulations were published in November
- there will be a PAC hearing on 20 January regarding the NAO report published in December
- the Local Government Finance settlement was issued in December, and the consultation closed on 15 January
- the allocations for Freeze Grant were sent out on 15 January
- the Local Council Tax Partnership Forum met on 04 December and it was suggested that there was some evidence that around a third of schemes were thinking of changing. Collection rate seemed to be holding at the expected level.

The LAAs were pointed out that LAs will need to know of any of any amendments to uprating as soon as possible.

Funding for Local Welfare Provision

The LAAs had raised this issue under AOB.

DCLG set out the background to the changes in how Local Welfare Provision has been funded.

The Steering Group discussed the issues around the expectation that funding for 2015-16 should come from LA's general funding rather than a separate grant, particularly in the context of reduced funding overall.

It was agreed that this would be an item for the next Steering Group meeting, and someone from the DWP social fund team would be asked to attend.

4. Transition Working Group (TWG)/Universal Credit (UC)

TWG

DWP explained that TWG had not met since the December Steering Group meeting. He added that TWG will meet on 22 January when proposals for transition and migration planning along with more details regarding roll out will be discussed.

UC

DWP referred the meeting to the recent Ministerial statement on the roll out, following on from the statement in July concerning the numbers of sites.

DWP summarised the recent developments:

- forward planning will allow sufficient time for testing and gradual expansion

- existing service arrangements for the pathfinder will continue with continued investment in that service model
- further development of the work started with Government Digital Service to extend the digital service, building in learning from the Live Service
- DWP gave the meeting an outline of developments planned for 2014 through 2016.

The LAAs asked whether current levels of subsidy will be maintained. DWP reiterated the Minister's commitment to maintain the current level of HB administration for 2014/15 (subject to other pressures), and to discuss appropriate levels for 2015/16.

Direct Payment Demonstration Projects:

- work is ongoing to assess the projects with research commissioned and underway
- some LAs that took part have been maintaining direct payments to claimants
- a working group has been set up with social landlords and stock owning LAs.

Local Service Support Framework (LSSF)

DWP set out the current thinking around LSSF and the links established with the LA Led Pilots and the LAs that participated in the Direct Payment Demonstration Projects.

It was important to achieve a balance between these activities and new initiatives with new LAs. Publicity is being considered, along with inviting expressions of interest in the trialing work outlined in the December update document.

5. Options for DHP Allocation 2014/15

DWP explained the policy thinking behind the DHP funding, to target it to where it is most needed.

DWP gave a breakdown of the component areas for funding.

DWP explained the methodology, and the thinking behind the 2 recommended options for Core Funding and the Benefit Cap. He asked the Steering Group to consider and agree the options, Which will then be put before Ministers with a circular to be issued at the end of January.

The LAAs stated their preference for option 1 for Core funding and were prepared to accept either option for the Benefit Cap.

6. Funding Streams for Oversight Working Group – Terms of Reference (ToR)

DWP referred the meeting to the ToR for the Oversight Working Group which will create a forum for identifying and resolving issues that will impact on local authority funding provided by DWP from 2015/16 and beyond. LAA representation will be dependent on particular agendas.

It was agreed that the LAAs will pass any comments on the ToR to Mont Goldman.

7. Time Limiting Access to Jobseekers Allowance for EEA Migrants

DWP led the meeting through;

- the background to the changes to the regulations
- the effects of the changes
- impacts on Jobseekers Allowance and Housing Benefit.

DWP confirmed that for new claims to JSA made by EEA migrants on or after 01 January 2014, entitlement to income based JSA will cease after 6 months unless the claimant can show that they have a genuine chance of getting a job. If they fail to demonstrate this requirement they will cease to receive JSA and this means Housing Benefit would also cease.

The Steering Group discussed the differences between new claims and new arrivals.

The LAAs pointed out that LAs will need to know likely volumes and appeals as soon as possible, along with written guidance. It was agreed that for the foreseeable future this should be a standing agenda item.

The LAAs asked about the potential impact of time limiting access to Jobseekers Allowance for EEA migrants on Council Tax Reduction Schemes.

An action point was taken for DWP to ask DCLG colleagues to look into potential impact of time limiting access to Jobseekers Allowance for EEA migrants on Council Tax Reduction Schemes.

8. AOB

Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday 05 February 2014, Room 6.03 Caxton House. ***[Note: This meeting was subsequently cancelled as a 'round the table' meeting and items to be cleared by correspondence; the next 'round the table' meeting will take place on Wednesday 05 March Room 6.03 Caxton House starting at 11.30]***

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