



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting:	Practitioner Operations Group (POG)
Date:	23 October 2013
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	<p>DWP: Bill Hern (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Phil Mercer, Paul Bessell (dial-in), David Gleave, Wayne Norfolk, Vinny Patel (dial-in), Lisa Sutherland, Phillipa Fallowfield, Andrea Teal, Alice Bradley (DCLG)</p> <p>Observers: Duramani Karim, Chris Kearney</p> <p>LAAs: June Deans, Paul Ellery, Pam Richardson, Mark Gillmore Gwyn Thomas,</p> <p>Dial-in: Martin O'Neill</p>
Apologies:	Lesley Pigott, Jane McManus, Alan Sinclair, Mark Underwood, Colin Wallbank, Alison McGrory, Matthew Evans, Frankie Cartwright

1. **Welcome and Introductions:**

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

2. **Matters Arising**

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

3. **ATLAS/ETD Merge**

DWP updated the meeting:

- The ATLAS/ETD merge was originally planned for April 2013 but was delayed to prepare for Benefit Cap and PIP data.
- Delivery for the merge is scheduled for April 2014 and work is ongoing with DWP and LA IT suppliers.
- Delivery for April 2014 is important as the ETD server site is due to close at the

end of May 2013.

- Once the Minister has approved, Joint Integration Testing can commence.
- Internal discussion is ongoing around whether implementation will be a “big bang” or a phased approach with early adopters.
- The team is in discussion with the LA IT suppliers regarding delivery timescales.
- Once the test files are built they will be run through the ATLAS infrastructure and then passed to the software suppliers to test through their systems.
- DWP cannot supply live cases for testing due to security constraints.

POG members pointed out the difficulties previously experienced with test data that did not replicate the live environment.

DWP explained that the LADS sub-group which includes suppliers and LA representatives is looking at test files in order to make them more robust and comprehensive.

The test files will be tested in a pre-production environment to get assurance before loading onto live systems.

The LADS team will provide regular updates to POG.

POG members raised an issue around ETDs and retrospective periods where a sanction has been applied. LAs are experiencing pressure from advice agencies.

An action point was taken for the LADS team agreed to contact colleagues in policy to investigate issues around ETDs and retrospective periods where a sanction has been applied.

4. PSN

DWP updated the meeting:

- The Cabinet Office is working with 410 LAs, of which 157 are now compliant.
- Originally this project had been about migrating LAs across to the PSN. So far only a handful have migrated and for the most part this has gone smoothly. A small number of LAs are currently in the process of migrating.
- A major issue has developed around compliance with the PSN Code of Connection (CoCo) and, indeed, with the existing GCSX CoCo. It has become evident to Cabinet Office that there are issues around compliancy with the existing CoCo which need to be resolved before they can migrate to PSN.

DWP is working with Cabinet Office on issues around compliance with a view to establishing a clear process for dealing with compliance issues and to try and ensure that LAs do not lose the ability to share data. DWP is also working very closely with individual LAs to ensure that Revenues and Benefits managers are aware of the potential risks and are in a position to liaise with their counterparts in IT. DWP has established some contingency arrangements which can be shared with POG. The use of encrypted e-mail is one of the options for some data. Other additional possibilities are

still being looked at. DWP would have to make a judgment on the reasons for any LA's non-compliance and take a decision on whether it was willing to invoke these contingency arrangements if an LA's data handling arrangements were deemed too insecure.

POG members felt that contingency for Benefit Cap cases is a key issue.

An action point was taken for DWP to share the contingency arrangements with POG.

Cabinet Office has three stages for escalation.

POG members expressed concern around the conditions for compliance. They also noted the costs involved and asked whether any additional funding would be available.

DWP explained that Cabinet Office is employing specialists to scrutinise LA submissions for compliance.

With regard to funding, DWP has raised this with Cabinet Office and been told that no additional funding will be available. It was understood that the LGA has raised an issue with the Cabinet Office citing the new burdens principle.

Within DWP a small IT project team will help with migration and a small support team has been set up to work with the Cabinet Office to establish a mutual understanding of the processes involved. The team is also working with the Benefit and IT managers of the LAs at most risk.

5. Benefit Cap

DWP highlighted the following:

Uprating:

- There no plans to amend the cap itself.
- From 07 April, uprated benefit award rates are effective and DWP staff at Belfast will review every capped case. The uprating reviews should take six weeks to complete.
- The project team has been working with the LA IT software suppliers to develop a solution to automate revisions to the benefit cap.
- Where a DHP is in payment, automation can be decided by the individual LA.

POG members noted that decision notices will need to be amended to include information about uprating for benefit cap cases.

It is not the intention to provide any additional scans, and details on uprating had been discussed at the IT Software Suppliers' forum.

POG members were content with these arrangements.

Notification of a permanent decrease or end to Housing Benefit:

- There will be a slight change to the process due to the time lag from SHBE.
- LAs will be asked to notify DWP through an email template when HB is

permanently decreased or ended.

The bulletin would give a clear definition of end of entitlement.

POG noted that the volume of such cases will need careful monitoring.

Dual claims across different LAs:

- POG members suggested that each LA should have a named contact for these cases.
- DWP guidance on how to apportion the cap would be needed. DWP explained that treatment would be same as dual cases in a single LA.
- The timescales for contacting the second LA would be within seven working days.
- The cap will apply from the Monday following the decision date.
- IT constraints mean that Belfast will not be able to notify both LAs simultaneously
- Process details will be set out in a circular, the draft of which will be shared with POG for their comments.

POG members were concerned that LA-run Temporary Accommodation is not exempted from the cap.

6. SITRA Survey on Supported Housing

DCLG gave the background to their commissioning of this survey, which was to gain a clearer picture of what is known on supported accommodation.

The survey confirmed expectations that the national picture is still unclear with some apparent discrepancies.

POG members raised an issue around the consultation document, 'Housing Benefit Reform Supported Housing' October 2011, with particular reference to Rent Officer referrals.

7. Changes to the Size Criteria

DWP referred the meeting to the draft circular on changes to the size criteria for a disabled child requiring their own bedroom. Following a change in legislation the draft regulations were issued to the LAA Steering Group in September.

Feedback from previous guidance had indicated that more specificity was required.

POG members were concerned about the potential difficulties facing LAs because of the level of complexity of the questions needing to be asked, and the assessment of these cases, given the subjective and selective process involved in forming a judgment. They added that such complex assessments would be difficult to administer.

POG members pointed out that guidance would be needed on awards granted prior to the introduction of the DLA gateway.

DWP is waiting for the SSAC report on the regulations.

8. First Tier Tribunals

DWP updated the meeting. Statements of Reasons have been requested, and guidance will be issued to LAs asking them to inform DWP of decisions and whether the LA will be appealing or not.

The meeting also discussed the definition of a bedroom.

9. AOB

POG members raised an issue around challenges received from welfare rights organisations on notifications for the benefit cap which contain no right to appeal. POG agreed to forward the query to DWP for consideration.

Date of Next Meeting The next POG will take place on 20 November Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30

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