



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting:	Practitioner Operations Group (POG)
Date:	29 January 2014
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	<p>DWP: Geoff Scammell (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), David Gleave, David Keir, Beverley Winnemore, Collette Hughes, Janet Wilkinson, Sam Higley</p> <p>LAAs: June Deans, Gwyn Thomas, Mark Gillmore, Paul Ellery, June Deans</p> <p>Dial-in: Matthew Evans, Pam Richardson</p>
Apologies:	Frankie Cartwright Jane McManus, Alan Sinclair, Mark Underwood, Colin Wallbank, Alison McGrory, Karl Thomas, Martin O'Neill
1. Welcome and Introductions:	<p>DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in.</p>
2. Matters Arising	<p>Minutes</p> <p>The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.</p> <p>Action Points</p> <p>The action points from November's meeting were cleared.</p>
3. Migrants Access to Benefits	<p>DWP set out the current position on migrants' access to benefits.</p> <p>Broad context and new measures</p> <p>The two measures announced by the Government in March 2013 are the e-HRT along with time limiting entitlement to JSA for EEA jobseekers and EEA nationals with retained worker status, to be administered through the Genuine Prospect of Work (GPoW) assessment</p> <p>The additional three measures the Government announced in November 2013 were:</p>

- i) To introduce a 3 month residency requirement in addition to the HRT.
- ii) To ensure EEA jobseekers will be unable to access to HB.
- iii) To tighten the earnings threshold to trigger an assessment whether EEA nationals claiming income related benefits is or has been in meaningful and effective work.

Measures Implemented

- E-HRT went live in December 2013.
- GPoW went live on 01 January 2014, with the first GPoW assessments due to take place in July 2014.
- The 3 month residency condition went live on 01 January 2014.
- The new measures for the Earnings Threshold will be introduced from 01 March 2014 for JSA and HB, with other income based benefits to follow later.
- The change affecting HB will be introduced from 01 April 2014.

Engagement

- The Steering Group was updated on 16 December 2013 and a letter to the Steering Group members followed.
- Attended the January Steering Group meeting and the matter was also discussed at the Software Suppliers Forum in January 2014.
- Letters explaining the change affecting HB were sent to the software suppliers and the Steering Group and to all of the LAs in January 2014. .

DWP set out the process for limiting EEA migrants' access to benefits from April 2014, and the current process for their access to HB.

Impact on LAs

- GPoW – LAs will receive notification where JSA ceases after 6 months.
- There will be a potential reduction in claims due to claims being disallowed under the 3 month residency rule.
- New guidance will be required for the Minimum Earnings Threshold. A two tier approach will be required when differentiating between a EEA jobseeker and one with Retained Worker status.
- The HB solution will be a tactical one involving clerical interventions to prevent payment of HB. Secure email will be used for notifying LAs. A longer term IT solution is being investigated.

In the discussion that followed the key points to emerge were:

- There are issues around Working Tax Credits and data sharing with HMRC.

- There are issues around the benefit cap.
- The link between the linking rules and Retained Worker status will need further investigation.
- There are issues around European case law.
- Broad guidance would be welcomed around challenges from the European Court of Human Rights.
- The use of secure email will need further investigation.
- Whether the definition of the Minimum Earnings Threshold will apply solely to EEA migrants or whether it will be subject to the HRT..
- POG should be regularly updated on progress.

Action points were taken for :

- DWP to liaise with the benefit cap policy owners on how these new regulations will impact on households subject to the benefit cap.
- DWP to feed back POG's concerns around European case law to colleagues in the International policy area.
- DWP to feed back POG's concerns around challenges from the European Court of Human Rights to colleagues in the International policy area.

With regard to communications around the proposed approach to suppress HB, POG members made the following recommendations:

- A letter to LA Revenues and Benefits Managers informing them of what is planned, giving a broad timetable for implementation.
- To issue an Urgent Bulletin followed by a Circular.

A further action point was taken for wider liaison.

4. Real Time Information (RTI) Bulk Data Matching Initiative

DWP set out the current position on RTI bulk data matching.

Background:

- RTI is HMRC's system for collecting PAYE information from employers and pension providers immediately after each payment is made.
- The DWP RTI Bulk Data Matching Initiative will carry out a bulk data-match against DWP legacy benefits.
- The planning assumption is that this exercise will start in first quarter of 2014.

- Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance, Pension Credit, Employment Support Allowance and Housing Benefit will be impacted by this proposal.
- The initiative was included in the Autumn Statement which included estimated AME savings.

Volumes:

DWP gave an estimate of the current volume of overpayments and the likely numbers to be targeted in this exercise.

A one off match will be carried out over the course of 2014/15. The matches will be staggered over a number of monthly tranches up to December 2014, subject to some constraints.

Work is ongoing to look at prioritisation of cases to ensure the early identification of high value cases.

Work is ongoing with DWP Housing Delivery Division to identify the data items that are required from the HMRC RTI system to ensure sufficient information is provided to allow cases to be re-assessed. The RTI system was first introduced in April 2013, with the majority of employers migrating to the system in October 2013.

Work is ongoing to agree a solution for transmitting referrals to Local Authorities, taking into account cost, delivery timescales and security. Options that have been considered include:

- ATLAS: Use of ATLAS will deliver a higher level of automation although changes to the schema will be required.
- Other options are:
 - i) A clerical process.
 - ii) Generic File Transfer Service (GFTS).
 - iii) DWP laptops.
 - iv) G Cloud Impact Level 3 Tool.

[Note subsequent to the meeting the options have been narrowed down to include the G Cloud IL3 Tool, Secure E-Mail and the National Audit Offices mechanism for transferring referrals for the National Fraud Initiative- work is ongoing to engage with the software suppliers for any changes which may be required.]

POG agreed that referrals should be sent to Revenues and Benefits units.

A feedback mechanism for DWP to track AME savings will be required.

Engagement

- Attendance and discussion at the January Software Suppliers Forum.
- Communication to LA Chief Executives is planned for February 2014.

- Regular updates to Security Operations Group are planned for February and March 2014.
- POG members suggested that an item should be included in a General Information Bulletin as well as requesting engagement with any workshops planned.

In the discussion that followed the key points to emerge were:

- How Effective Dates can be calculated, with the potential need for LAs to contact employers.
- There will be some cases where the employment/non state pension commenced prior to the RTI record.
- LAs will need a breakdown of volumes and modes of referral as soon as possible.
- Action will need to take place as quickly as possible and feedback on the data will be required.
- There was a suggestion that SHBE could be used as route by which feedback could be provided.

An action point was taken for DWP to liaise with colleagues from Information, Governance and Security and analysts to check whether SHBE could be used to provide feedback on the RTI data.

Work is in progress to prioritise RTI referrals to ensure that high value cases are referred early on in the exercise.

The meeting also discussed the format of how records will be presented. This has yet to be worked out but the assumption is that there will be one file with a weekly breakdown.

There was a request that LA's were involved in testing the RTI outputs to get an understanding of the quality of the data and what it will look like.

One of the LA's said that they would volunteer to be involved in the testing and it was agreed that they would be included in any testing that was carried out.

5. AOB

1) DHP Monitoring

DWP updated the meeting. For consistency, the returns for the second half of the year will be based on the amount each LA has committed to spend. This will be communicated to the software suppliers. Manual spreadsheets will be issued to LAs. An action point was taken for DWP to send the details for monitoring DHPs to LAs as soon as possible.

DWP confirmed that the DHP allocation for 2014/15 had been announced on 29 January 2014.

2) Upper Tier Tribunal Decision (CH 140 2013)

POG members referred the meeting to this decision regarding an appeal against a LA decision in respect of overnight carers. DWP explained that work is ongoing around re-designation of property and space standards in respect of the Housing Act.

3) Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (RSRS)

POG members pointed out that trawling back for pre 1996 cases affected by the new regulations to close the loophole would be onerous and time consuming for LAs. An action point was taken for DWP to check whether any additional funding would be available for LAs in respect of the additional work to be undertaken by LAs with regard to the new regulations to close the loophole and exempt pre-1996 working-age social sector housing benefit tenants who are not subject to the RSRS.

POG members also asked for a timetable for issuing the new regulations to close the RSRS loophole, pointing out that there would be issues around uprating. They added that guidance would be need for LAs.

Action points were taken for DWP to check on the timetable for issuing the new regulations to close the RSRS loophole, and to check whether guidance can be issued to LAs.

Date of Next Meeting

The next POG will take place on 26 February Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30 [**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 26 March 2014 Room 6.03 Caxton House starting at 11.30]**

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