



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting:	DWP LAA Steering Group
Date:	09 July 2014
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	<p>DWP: Clare Elliott (Chair), Kath Murphy (Secretariat), Bill Hern, Huw Meredith, Manny Ibiayo, Mel Frankham, Marco Almeida, Jenita Chelva, Fiona Fellows, Peter Cawdron, Miriam Smith</p> <p>Dial-in Janet Wilkinson, David Spence, Dawn Singer, Alexander Suswillo, Chris Etty, Jo Blythin</p> <p>DCLG: Leona Patterson</p> <p>LAAs: Dan McCartney, Pat Durkin, Colin Wallbank, Paul Ellary, Howard Mason</p> <p>Dial-in: Peter Meehan, Steve Carey, Chris Gibbs, John Rosenbloom</p> <p>Observer: Kelly McKenna, Northern Ireland Rate Rebate Replacement Programme</p>
Apologies:	Mont Goldman, Adrian Shooter, Andrew Parfitt, Valerie Pearce, Lesley Piggott, Andrew Stevens, John Swinnerton, Margaret Uhure, Rose Doran, Matthew Evans, Ben Dixon

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

DCLG responded to their two action points from June's meeting.

In respect of Liability Orders for Local Council Tax Support schemes (LCTS); DCLG is currently considering the implications of the East Riding judgement.

In respect of prescribed requirements regulations: DCLG will always update the

prescribed requirements in November/December in time to take into account the uprating of the DWP allowances and to reflect any relevant changes which have been made to HB regulations. Ministers may also decide to make further changes however none are planned at present, although Ministers will always reserve the right to make changes to the prescribed regulations up until they are published. DCLG will update the group if there are any changes to this position.

2. Updates:

Local Council Tax Support Administration Subsidy 2015/16

DCLG explained the principles and approach for distributing the LCTS administration funding for 2015/16. Discussions had taken place at the Council Tax Partnership Forum on 23 June.

The same formula will be used for 2015/16. DCLG will receive the data for the Revenue Outturn returns in August and should be in a position to share that in September.

DWP explained to the meeting that the amount of HB administration funding for 2015/16 has yet to be confirmed but that DWP will be working with DCLG and the Devolved Administrations and should be in a position to make an announcement six months before the start of the financial year.

LCTS New Burdens 2015/16

There is currently no amount confirmed for 2015/16 but consideration is being given to the possible levels of funding if required and necessary. A consultation document will be issued at the end of August. DCLG explained that they have revisited the original five elements and recalculated the costs:

- IT costs - subject to reduction as it is considered that these should now be finished.
- Scheme Design – subject to reduction as the schemes are all operational there should be no further costs associated with designing the scheme.
- Consultation – subject to reduction as schemes have now been developed the need to consult with claimants has reduced and costs should have reduced significantly.
- Appeals – subject to reduction as the actual numbers received to date are lower than the original assumption.
- Communications – whilst it is felt that there should be some reduction in spending the amount allocated will not reduce in line with the other elements.

The LAAs asked if DCLG could show the LCTS grant as a separate pot as it isn't possible to see how much has been allocated. The LAAs stated that it is very difficult for Finance Directors to calculate what funding has been ring-fenced when there is no actual breakdown of their settlement. The LAAs also asked if DCLG had carried out any research to establish if any LAs had plans to redesign their schemes and if so would DCLG revisit the settlement. DCLG explained that there were no plans to revisit the settlement but that LAs could feed into the forthcoming consultation.

Real Time Information (RTI) Bulk Data Matching Project

DWP thanked Steering Group members for reviewing and providing comments on the recent communications that were issued to Chief Executive Officers and Revenues and Benefits managers. There are further communications planned for HB administration staff in the next few weeks. The project is working toward a mid-September go-live as planned although they would like to use a small group of LAs to look at the data for quality assurance purposes during August, although any changes would not be included in the first tranche of data in September.

Analysts are currently working on profiles which will be issued on a monthly basis from September until January. The LAAs asked for clarification on whether the profiles would include details of “Hours Worked”. DWP confirmed that this information will not be included. The LAAs are concerned that LAs will now need to have more interventions to obtain this information and asked whether this has been factored in to the funding for additional costs. The LAAs asked for details of the planning assumptions to support this and have asked for the funding to be revisited.

The LAAs asked if the profiles would show any changes for the same claimant from one month to the next. DWP explained that this is a one-off case cleansing exercise and there would only be one referral per claimant and that LAs would not be receiving updated information from one month to the next. The LAAs on learning that the profiles will not show “Hours Worked” are concerned that the 4 week easement would not be sufficient if manual processes are needed to collect this information.

An action point was taken for DWP to provide confirmation of what has been included in the funding for additional costs, and to include what assumptions have been made by the project.

Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)

All Phase 1 LAs went live on 1 July with 35 staff transferring to DWP.

Phase 2 engagement has already started but these sites will not start to migrate until October. In the meantime the project will be carrying out an evaluation of Phase 1 to understand what went well and identify any lessons that can be learned.

The project has been working with the Practitioners’ Operations Group (POG) and Security Operations’ Group (SOG) on the Service Level Agreement for Service Provision which will be sent to Steering Group members for final sign-off before being issued.

The LAAs asked for clarification of the timescales as not all authorities are transferring at the same time; there is the potential for there to be more officers than managers transferring. DWP explained that the project had already planned for that scenario. The difficulty for the project is that final numbers of LA fraud staff transferring to DWP are not fixed until the actual implementation date has been reached. DWP had expected 38 staff to transfer in Phase 1 but 3 staff withdrew just before the deadline.

Regarding the reduction in the administration grant for SFIS, DWP confirmed that this was based on the costs of the service moving from LAs to DWP and did not include

items such as a saving on LA estates.

The LGA and CoSLA expressed their concerns about the constant reduction in HB administration subsidy, not just in respect of SFIS but across all streams and the eventual impact on the quality of service that LAs will be able to provide. DWP noted the concerns expressed.

3. Waiting Days Project

DWP gave a verbal update to the Steering Group on their plans for the introduction of the Waiting Days measure. The key messages given were:

- the Budget statement of 19 March 2014 announced that the number of waiting days in Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) would be increased from 3 to 7
- the proposed changes are due to come into force on 27 October 2014 and will apply to both contribution-based and income-based benefit entitlement
- claimants who are protected by the existing exemption provisions will be unaffected by the proposed change
- claimants will be advised of the changes by DWP staff when they make their claim and will be advised that they may be able to claim a Short Term Benefit Advance
- both ESA and JSA claim forms will be amended, JSA online and GOV.UK being updated too
- guidance will be issued to LAs confirming arrangements from October. Waiting days do not apply to HB although the LAAs stated that this change will make claims more complex.

The LAAs asked to see how the decision on nil funding for this change had been arrived at.

An action point was taken for DWP to provide some detail as to how the decision on nil funding for this change had been arrived at.

Review of HB fraud and error

DWP explained that the Fraud, Error and Debt Council had commissioned a review of HB fraud and error. A strategy is to be developed which will take account of current best practice, this should help to minimize the risk of overpayments in the lead up to the roll-out of Universal Credit.

To take this work forward DWP has set up two groups and are seeking formal input and support from the LAAs for both of those groups. The Steering Group is to meet monthly with the Working Group meeting fortnightly; there will also be a need to clear items urgently by phone or correspondence. They would be looking to the joint DWP/LAA Steering Group to be consulted on any key decisions made by the HB Fraud, Error and Debt Steering Group.

At the same time the National Audit Office (NAO) is undertaking a Value for Money exercise on Housing Benefit fraud and error with fieldwork already underway, the findings are due to be published in the autumn.

The LAAs asked for details of the timescales for this review and queried its timing in light of the as the NAO exercise. They asked how the two groups will feed into this Steering Group

DWP explained that the NAO were already working with Fraud and Error in regard to the levels of fraud and error in all benefits, a strategy has already been developed for Pension Credit and JSA, and the next step is to develop a strategy for tackling fraud and error in HB.

The main focus of the strategy will be to concentrate on claimant error but the groups will also need to look at official error and fraud. The LAAs stated that DWP should expect to see a spike in the amount of fraud and error being reported as a consequence of the number of initiatives being implemented during 2014/15.

DWP stated that the groups will continue to meet in the meantime while LAAs decided who would attend. COSLA will be invited to the Fraud, Error and Debt Steering Group on 22 July.

An action point was taken for DWP to provide a schedule of dates for the meetings.

An action point was taken for LAAs to provide names of suitable representatives to participate in the groups.

Universal Credit /Transition Working Group (TWG)

Universal Credit

DWP gave the following update

- the north west expansion is progressing week by week
- in total there are now 24 Jobcentre Plus sites and partner LAs covering those postcodes delivering Universal Credit
- Universal Credit is now accepting claims from couples in 5 sites
- Universal Credit is now accepting claims from existing HB claimants in all live service sites.

DWP advised the meeting that an announcement was imminent on which partnerships were selected to be a Local Support Services trial site.

TWG

Highlighted from the recent TWG meeting:

- Universal Credit Partnership Forum discussed data sharing, they want to set up a sub-group to provide advice and challenge on the work that DWP is doing
- The Finance and Commercial Group will be reconvened for a joint meeting with the Local Service Support Framework (LSSF) task force finance sub-group to construct a work plan going forward based on the Universal Credit and LSSF timeline and the timing of finance decisions.

4. AOB

Legislative change for administrative penalties

DWP explained:

- tougher measures being introduced from April 2015, and the penalty will be increased to a new maximum.
- DWP will be writing to the LAA representatives in July to formally advise about the change
- the LAAs will be sent a copy of the Draft Order
- the normal 6 week consultation period will apply; DWP welcomes any comments on the Draft Order.

Local Welfare Assistance

The LAAs expressed their concerns about a letter that was sent to Chief Executives from, Minister of State for Pensions, on 2 July.

An action point was taken for DWP to provide clarification of the letter that was issued on 2 July.

Rationalisation of consultation forums

DWP raised this item as it has become increasingly aware that people were being spread quite thin due to the number of groups and forums that are now in existence requiring LAA/LA input. The LAAs asked about the possibility of some meetings being arranged on the same day as the Steering Group meeting to make the most of that day. DWP agreed to carry out a mapping exercise to get a full picture of all the groups that are currently meeting. LAAs were asked to provide the details of the various groups they were involved with.

An action point was taken for the LAAs to provide details of the various groups and forums they sit on.

Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Wednesday 6 August, Room 6.03 Caxton House.

Note – subsequently, the August meeting did not take place

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