

Housing Benefit Circular

Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House, Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA

HB A5/2015

ADJUDICATION AND OPERATIONS CIRCULAR

WHO SHOULD READ	All Housing Benefit staff
ACTION	For information
SUBJECT	Housing Benefit operational information, performance support and inspection in 2015/16

Guidance Manual

The information in this circular does not affect the content of the HB Guidance Manual.

Queries

extra copies of this circular/copies of previous circulars can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/housing-benefit-for-local-authorities-circulars>

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Housing Benefit operational information, performance support and inspection in 2015/16

Introduction

1. This circular sets out the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) approach in relation to its use of Housing Benefit (HB) operational performance information, the support it provides to local authorities (LAs) and its engagement and inspection work. It takes account of on-going reforms such as the rollout of Universal Credit and the Single Fraud Investigation Service and the increased focus on the need to reduce HB fraud and error.

Inspection and reporting arrangements for 2015/16

2. Due to the work of LAs and their willingness to work in partnership with DWP on HB delivery matters, DWP found no need to carry out any HB inspections in England in 2014/15. But we reserves the right to do so in 2015/16 if circumstances warrant it, i.e. if performance causes concern after an LA had been allowed some time to improve and a report to the Secretary of State on the matter is considered necessary.
3. An inspection would normally be focused on critical HB issues rather than an assessment of the entire benefit service. Decisions to inspect will be taken separately from those related to the provision of free consultancy support. (For more on support see paragraph 7 below).
4. In Scotland and Wales decisions on audit/inspection and the production of reports rest with the relevant audit bodies. DWP liaises with these audit bodies, as necessary.

Areas of importance and DWP interests

5. Whilst it is for LAs to decide how best to deliver their HB services, DWP's interests arise from:
 - its funding responsibilities
 - its need to deliver welfare and fraud and error reforms
 - the continuing need to ensure the right benefit goes to the right people at the right time, in particular that:
 - HB claims and changes of circumstances are processed speedily and accurately
 - claims are kept right, which includes finding, actioning and encouraging the reporting of changes of circumstances to help minimise overpayments arising from claimant fraud or error and to help minimise underpayments of benefits
 - as the Single Fraud Investigation Service rolls out, LAs continue to play their part in preventing, detecting, correcting, and deterring fraud and error

- LAs can provide assurance on the service through their own performance management arrangements and their provision of information to DWP.

Sources of HB operational information

6. To decide if there is a need to open up any discussions with an LA on HB operational and delivery matters, DWP will draw on the following sources of information:
 - Single Housing Benefit Extract data published by DWP (e.g. caseload, speed of processing statistics and any data that may be published in future on the value/number of changes/reductions in HB entitlements)
 - subsidy returns and any audit qualifications
 - HB Recoveries and Fraud statistics – fraud and overpayment data
 - information on DWP HB data-matching exercises, including LA returns for these
 - national statistics on the overall monetary value of HB fraud and error
 - other information, such as any relevant reports produced by the audit bodies, correspondence received in DWP and press/media stories.

DWP support to LAs

7. Whilst it is for LAs to decide what sources of support they may wish to draw on to deliver any necessary improvements to their HB service, DWP continues to offer free consultancy support. The Performance Development Team (PDT) can provide support to LAs in England, Scotland and Wales. To find out more about possible PDT support please contact Zoë Brown – email: zoe.brown@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or telephone 07825 255609
8. New good practice on key aspects of HB performance is now being developed and will be placed on the part of the GOV.UK website that provides HB claims processing and good practice information for local authority staff.