



Summary Minutes

- Title of meeting:** Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)
- Date:** 30 September 2015
- Location:** Caxton House Room 6.03
- Attendees:** **DWP:** Bill Hern (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Simon McCullough, Andy Mclean Jane Watson, Sam Higley, Alexandra Duffy Margaret Jackson (HMRC), Robert Irvine
Dial in: Mike Keegan, Michelle Heath, Sue Shillito, Janet Mullaney
- LAAs:** Gwyn Thomas, June Deans, Chris Boylett, Mark Gillmore Frankie Cartwright, Martin O'Neill
Dial-in: Pamela Richardson, John Rosenbloom, Tricia Smith, Jean Cheeseman, Kirstine McFadyen
- Apologies:** Paul Ellary, Clare Elliott, Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank, Andrew Hyatt, Charles Taylor, Iain Marshalsay, Carol Cleland, Matthew Evans, Paula Doherty.

1. Welcome and Introductions:

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

2. Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

The action points were cleared.

3. Payment Deduction Project (PDP): Housing Benefit (HB) Recoveries from Universal Credit (UC)

DWP gave a high level summary of the proposed automated solution for recovery of HB debt, including:

- An overview of PDP and the commission by UC to ensure existing benefit debts and loans are migrated to UC when a claim to UC is made.

- The proposed automated solution emphasising that LAs will retain ownership of the debt.
- LA debt referrals to DWP Debt Manager System and recovery to be sent by monthly payments to LAs.
- The automated interface for referrals of HB debts where the customer claims UC, and HB debts where the customer is in receipt of a prescribed legacy benefit.
- How Debt Management will handle legacy benefit and UC benefit deductions.
- The UC priority order of deductions.
- How HB debt will be recovered under the UC digital service.
- DWP explained that PDP was seeking POG's endorsement for its proposals regarding monthly payment schedules.

POG members agreed to PDP's recommendation subject to an early formal review as volumes increase.

POG members expressed disappointment that the project was scoped only for recoveries of HB, pointing out that other recoverable LA debt such Council Tax and rent arrears could be dealt with in a single transaction through the automated solution.

DWP noted POG's concerns and agreed to pass them on to colleagues in the project.

4. HB Review

DWP acknowledged POG's recommendations to the review and advised the meeting that implementation has seen a significant improvement around LA challenges resulting in more feedback being received.

DWP advised the meeting of a plan to pilot a change to the accuracy checking process around LA secure prints which is currently resource intensive and requires officers having to attend LAs. DWP will give a progress report on the pilot to POG at November's meeting.

5. Changes to Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS)

DWP explained that the current contract is expiring.

DWP explained the proposed changes, adding that there will be no change to the current referrals receipt process.

HBMS is looking for volunteer LAs to receive what is usually sent as well as the proposed new version to compare and contrast. The information will remain the same but will look different.

DWP referred the meeting to changes to the Capital Rules, explaining that 2 LAs had volunteered to test the changes and that ideally HBMS would want more LA volunteers.

Several POG members put their LAs forward and DWP agreed to consider how best to publicise this.

6. Third Party Demand (HMRC)

HMRC is looking to reduce the volume of calls into their contact centres, and has been working with DWP in respect of the current demand. This meeting represented the first opportunity to engage with LAs.

Contact from LAs has increased and HMRC is looking at alternative ways to service the demand negating the need for LAs to call. POG members suggested that further analysis, such as a 'deep dive' into the causes for the increase could be of use. They added that some areas to look at with regard to LA calls in respect of Tax Credits would be:

- The change to full-time education to 18 years.
- Two-tier authorities where County Councils are unused or unwilling to make use of CIS.
- The possible impact of initiatives such as RTI and FERIS which are generating an increase in enquiries.
- Issues around Social Fund and Local Welfare Provision.

The meeting discussed the best way to influence or change current behaviors, and it was suggested that an item in a General Information Bulletin could be helpful.

7. Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)

DWP set out the current position regarding roll out and key activities.

DWP responded to the queries raised at the last meeting including:

- Piloting in conjunction with DCLG and LAs around LCTS; LAs in England, Scotland and Wales will be included in the Pilots.
- Escalation of POG's concerns on feedback to LAs on fraud referrals; it was agreed to invite representatives from Fraud and Error Service (FES) to the next meeting for a further discussion on feedback on referrals.
- Whether Management Information (MI) will be produced. DWP explained that the current thinking is to wait until roll-out has been completed before producing MI.

8. Benefit Cap

DWP updated the meeting:

- DWP will meet with the Minister to agree the implementation approach.
- Royal Assent is expected in March 2016.

POG members asked whether a staged approach to implementation was likely. DWP will need to contact those likely to be capped. As in the implementation of the first benefit cap, the cases will be dealt with by the team in Belfast. The benefit cap team will work with POG on how best to split these cases through the team in Belfast.

9. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs)

DWP gave the meeting a general update on DHPs.

With regard to the process for mid-year monitoring, DWP advised POG that the LAA Steering Group has been asked for views regarding allocation. Following feedback from the Steering Group, the recommended allocation methodology will be put to Ministers. Up to 30 September, the LA monitoring returns should be based on 'actual spend'.

POG asked whether funding for Temporary Accommodation in UC could be included as an item for the agenda for November meeting.

10. AOB

POG asked about RTI files and whether employer details could be included as this information is important for overpayment recoveries.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 25 November; Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30.

Contact: Mont Goldman
Email: Mont.goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Direct line: 020 7449 5327