



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 25 November 2015

Location: Caxton House Room 6.03

Attendees: DWP: Bill Hern (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Ann Culkin, Ann Shreeve, Steve Hume, Andy Mclean, Darren Baker, Adrian Shooter, Caroline Todd

Dial-in: Margaret Jackson (HMRC) Michelle Kevill

Observers: Diana Lusikila, Dee Khan, Sarah Lee-Coombes, Jonathan Parker

LAAs: Paul Ellary, Gwyn Thomas, Chris Boylett, Mark Gillmore, Frankie Cartwright, Martin O'Neill

Dial-in: Pamela Richardson, John Rosenbloom, Jean Cheeseman, Lisa Fuller, Matthew Evans

Apologies: Clare Elliott, June Deans, Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank, Andrew Hyatt, Charles Taylor, Iain Marshalsay, Carol Cleland, 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.

Action Points

The action points were cleared.

DWP explained its position on commercial arrangements for work carried out by local authority (LA) IT software suppliers.

3. **FERIS Update**

DWP acknowledged the concerns about FERIS expressed by POG members.

Regarding future FERIS arrangements, DWP explained that subject to confirmation; FERIS would receive additional funding to extend for a further 2

years. The FERIS team is working on lessons learned, in particular around how to refine the thresholds with the possibility of introducing a wider window to prevent LAs from falling short of the lower threshold. The FERIS team is also considering introducing additional optional Real Time Information (RTI) and improvements to the maintenance funding process. These and other considerations will need to be presented in a new business case.

POG members asked DWP to look at all aspects of FERIS, particularly around thresholds.

DWP acknowledged that LAs which are proactive may be finding it more difficult to meet thresholds, and that the FERIS team will be looking at Caseload Management Information (CMI). LAs are able to challenge baselines where there is a change in their caseloads. The FERIS team will be working to bring about improvements, such as increasing the volume of RTI, and looking at HMRC self-employment assessments as soon as possible.

Once funding is confirmed, the FERIS team will issue communications to LAs.

4. Bulletin G11/2015

POG members pointed out an anomaly in Bulletin G11/2015. This concerned evidence in support of electronic claims, and the advice given, which did not seem to align with digital policies. DWP explained the process followed by auditors in respect of DWP guidance, and how the LA's verification policy is interpreted. Action points were taken to jointly review the wording in G11/2015 and to issue a revised version.

5. Universal Credit (UC) Update

DWP addressed POG's concerns regarding:

Updating Customer Information System (CIS) After the Assessment Date.

- Once identification has been verified, it usually takes ten days for CIS to be updated. Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) data sharing should cover the required data.

Interest Flags for LCTS and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs).

- Where claimants change LA boundaries it is for LAs to set the flag.
- There is no interest flag for DHPs, but the Learning and Development pack issued to LAs illustrates how to obtain the specific data.

POG members asked about Overpayment Recovery from UC, and whether any statistics were available. DWP explained how LA referrals are made, that any non-responses to referrals can be investigated by UC service centres.

6. Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) Governance Group

DWP explained its intent to replicate governance arrangements which had worked well in Fraud and Error Service. DWP sought POG's views on membership of this group.

DWP explained the rationale behind setting up the group, and the importance of involving all of the stakeholders.

POG members pointed out that with the proliferation of sub-groups demanding its attention, resources are stretched. They also questioned the validity of this group from a LA perspective. They noted that the issues with which the group is concerned fall within the current remit of POG.

POG members added that individual LAs could be used as sounding boards, but POG should remain the main LA consultative body.

It was agreed that POG members would be canvassed for any volunteers for correspondence, and that updates from this group should be a standing agenda item at POG.

7. Third Party Demand

HMRC set out the reasons for LA enquiries to the HMRC help line in percentage terms, along with a breakdown by LA of the percentages of calls. HMRC is looking for LAs to self serve in order to reduce the volume of calls. HMRC plans to work with DWP to formulate some appropriate guidance for LAs.

POG members suggested an item in HB Direct or the General Information Bulletin could be helpful. They pointed out that County Councils could be responsible for some of the volume of calls and will need to be targeted, as well as other departments within LAs.

7. Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)

DWP advised the meeting that Management Information (MI) is being drafted for release in mid-December, adding that the MI will consist of high level information around national volumes and work outstanding.

POG members pointed out that their key area of concern was around the lower level detail, for example:

- MI to be broken down by LA.
- Details of rejected referrals, for both criminal and compliance cases.

POG members agreed to correspond with POG secretariat to give a clear indication of the types of information LAs require from any MI.

DWP pointed out that some LA referrals have not been sufficiently completed, for example NINOs have been omitted.

An action point was taken for DWP to issue a reminder to LAs on the information required to complete referrals.

8. AOB

DWP advised the meeting that a correction to an item in April's HB Direct on Direct Earnings Attachment will be issued.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 27 January 2016; Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30.

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