Title of meeting:	Practitioners Operational Group (POG)
Date:	30 March 2016
Location:	Caxton House Room 6.03
Attendees:	**DWP:** Bill Hern (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Darrell Smith, Janet Wilkinson, Michelle Heath, Simon Newitt, Carol Krahe, Wayne Norfolk **Dial-in**: Robert Irvine, John Nelson **LAAs:** Paul Ellary, Gwyn Thomas, Mark Gillmore, Frankie Cartwright, June Deans **Dial-in:** Pamela Richardson, Jean Cheeseman, Matthew Evans, Les Robertson
Apologies	Martin O'Neill, Chris Boylett, Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank, Andrew Hyatt, Charles Taylor, Iain Marshalsay, Carol Cleland, Paula Doherty, Lisa Fuller

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

The action points were cleared.

HB Review

Following on from previous discussions at POG in February and September 2015, DWP updated the meeting on the current position in respect of the Housing Benefit (HB) Review (Performance Management).

- work on streamlining the process is continuing
- recommendations from POG have been taken on board
- there has been some improvement in respect of engagement with LAs

- the review team is working together with colleagues in Housing Delivery Division (HDD).

DWP went on to explain that the Review Team has been working on a digital process to replace the existing clerical scheme. This process, which involves access to LA systems, and creating single points of contact, (SPOC) has received positive feedback and should eradicate the bulk of the security incidents resulting from the current clerical process.

DWP explained that this has been piloted in a small number of LAs and that it will be expanded and a further report will be produced for the May POG meeting.
With regard to the pilot, POG members asked whether any issues had arisen around inputting the data. DWP explained that there have been some issues around capacity, in respect of the National Audit Office rules for retention of documents.

POG members asked whether the percentage increase in LA challenges was known. DWP advised that HDD hold this information which can be shared with POG.

A discussion took place around the re-consideration process and the review period.

POG members also asked whether the information is sent directly to the Decision Maker. DWP explained that the information is received by the SPOC, and subject to supporting evidence being available, is passed to the checking officer.

4.   **Review of Supported Accommodation**

DWP updated the meeting:

- the research project has concluded and the final report is being drafted
- long term options for reforming the funding arrangements are under consideration and a Green Paper or public consultation is planned for later in the year.

DWP went on to confirm that Supported Accommodation cannot be included in Universal Credit (UC).

POG members referred to exemptions from the 1% reduction in social sector rents and the impact on service charges.

POG members asked whether DWP is intending to communicate with Supported Accommodation providers. DWP explained that once the report has been published, it will engage with providers.

POG members asked about the UC Gateway; there were concerns that the process for the short term solution wasn't effective in identifying specified accommodation cases. DWP agreed to take this away for further consideration.

5.   **Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI)**

DWP set out the following:

- the background to RTI, and the RTI Bulk Data Match which was rolled out to LAs in 2014

- how the use of Agile methodology in a test and learn environment creates a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) which is currently being tested with Pension Credit

- the aim of WURTI which is to increase the accuracy of claims entering the system, and to keep payments correct during the life of the claim

- the current position with regard to testing the MVP

- the next steps, including a request for Steering Group and POG to provide details of LAs to work with the Project to confirm user needs.

DWP also referred to establishing secure networks for the transmission of data to LAs.

POG members asked about the use of Alerts for claims already in payment. DWP explained that the current thinking was that the Data Hub could be used.

POG members asked whether the RTI data could be used for other purposes by LAs. DWP explained that there are sensitivities around the use of the data and consideration would be on a case by case basis.

Optional RTI

POG discussed the implications for subsidy if optional RTI is not actioned within 4 weeks, along with how files will be received, and whether LAs will be able to differentiate between standard and optional RTI.

With regard to differentiation, DWP is looking at 2 options:

i) A single file with a flag to show the optional RTI.

ii) Separate files with one for the optional RTI.

DWP added that both options are currently being discussed with departmental IT suppliers.

6. **HB Stop Notice in UC Live Service**

DWP updated the meeting on the process for the HB Stop Notice in UC Live Service.

DWP explained that the team is aware of issues in this area; details of which have been obtained following "Go, Look, See" visits to LAs and Service Centres. An action plan has been drawn up to improve the service and address such issues as:

- forms being sent late

- forms being issued to the wrong LAs

- forms not returned

- transcription errors on the forms.

DWP went on to say that the team is currently looking at developing a new design for

this process based on an interactive intuitive form which links with DWP email boxes. The form is a singular form and is sent to LAs but will look to address the issues currently faced.

DWP added that the HB stop process has 3 stages. These 3 stages are:

- form issued to LA by DWP

- form completed by LA and returned to DWP

- form processed by DWP and Debt recovery action undertaken if appropriate.

The team will be working with LAs for testing purposes, and will be in a position to give a more detailed presentation to the next POG meeting.

DWP confirmed that this process improvement is concerned with UC Live Service only and is at High Level Design stage and awaiting final approval.

Local Council Tax Schemes (LCTS) and the Data Hub

DWP explained that work is ongoing with IT suppliers and that 249 LAs are currently on the Hub. DWP added that there had been some initial teething problems with the data which have mainly been resolved. A fix for the remaining issues is planned for the 2 May release, and PDF will continue until the end of April when the LA IT suppliers are fully on board.

A POG member asked about data share for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) in UC in Scotland, as Scottish devolution has granted the Scottish Assembly powers which have created different requirements.

7. **Benefit Cap**

DWP updated the meeting:

- the Bill is now an Act

- claimants in receipt of Carers or Guardians Allowance will be exempted from the benefit cap when the changes to the levels come in

- movement in the labour market has led to a reduced estimate of the number of cases that are likely to be capped; this will clearly impact on caseloads.

DWP referred to plans for issuing letters to LAs confirming the new caseload and new burden details, and that scan details will be issued to individual LAs.

POG members asked about the treatment of affected cases in receipt of UC. DWP explained that for UC Live Service, letters will be issued and for Full Service, face to face interventions will take place.

7. **Future of Best Practice**

HDD sought POG's view on how best to continue the support offered to LAs in respect of Good Practice. DWP cited a revised Good Practice Guide as an example.

POG members did not think that revising the Good Practice Guide would add any value.

With regard to efficiency, POG members felt that what works in one LA may not work in another, and any comparison should be on a like for like basis.

It was agreed that HDD could produce Good Practice as and when it became relevant.

Where a particular topic is causing LAs problems, and HDD identifies 'good practice' it should produce some Good Practice material. POG also agreed that if it identifies a need for Good Practice it will raise the issue at the POG meeting.

8.   AOB

London Councils raised an issue around letters that have been issued to LAs asking for HB debt details to be returned by 30 April.

A POG member raised an issue around Retained Worker Status as shown on the Customer Information System (CIS). The POG member agreed to give more detail to HDD in order to ascertain whether this is a localised issue or one with wider implications.

A POG member referred the meeting to a Judicial Review concerning the recovery of overpaid DHP in respect of the Removal of Spare Room Subsidy; the outcome of which could have wider implications, particularly around offsetting overpaid DHPs against underpaid HB.

| **Date of Next Meeting** | The next POG will take place on 25 May 2016; Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30. |

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