



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 25 May 2016

Location: Caxton House Room 6.03

Attendees: DWP: Bill Hern (Chair), Adrian Shooter, Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Paul Selby, Darrell Smith, Wayne Norfolk, Robert Irvine

Dial-in: John Nelson, Ann Shreeve

Observer: Moira Smith

Local Authority Associations (LAAs): Paul Ellary, Gwyn Thomas, Sara Spark, June Deans

Dial-in: Pamela Richardson, Jean Cheeseman, Matthew Evans, Les Robertson, Frankie Cartwright, Tricia Smith

Apologies: Sian Peters, Chris Boylett, 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 dialing in.

Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

Action Points

The action points were cleared, with AP November 05, March 02, and March 04 ongoing.

With regard to AP March 04, POG members noted Housing Policy Division's (HPD) response to the query concerning recovery of overpaid Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), and offsetting overpayments of DHP against underpayments of Housing Benefit (HB). They asked for the action point to remain ongoing, pointing out that the regulations for DHPs pre-date the welfare reforms.

2. Universal Credit (UC) MGP1 (HB Stop Notice)

DWP updated the meeting:

- as part of the internal governance process the UC MGP1 has received approval from the Business Design Authority
- a detailed analysis will take place on 31 May
- the form will request the same information but will be easier to complete
- the process has been reviewed and its ease of issue should improve compliance rates
- the product will be tested with stakeholders including Local Authorities (LAs).

3. Benefit Cap

DWP updated the meeting:

- the Minister has written to the Scottish and Welsh Governments
- the Benefit Cap Changes project has written to LA Chief Executives
- the scans for LAs have been issued
- the website and helplines have been updated and are now live
- Jobcentres and LA Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) are in a state of readiness
- New Burdens funding was discussed and agreed at the May LAA Steering Group meeting.

The Benefit Cap Changes project will host a 'Round Table' event in late June/early July for stakeholders including LAs.

DWP initiated a discussion around DHPs, and whether their award should be more work focused. POG members emphasised the discretionary element of the award, pointing out the potential impact of conditionality on Temporary Accommodation and Affordable Rent.

With regard to the overall timetable, DWP explained that this was dependent on the date from which national capping commences, adding that the project is planning to issue a follow up letter in September, to capture any claimants who have, by then, become liable to be capped.

The meeting discussed national roll out, and DWP explained how the original cap was rolled out. DWP went on to say that one of the key issues for this roll out is around those who have an existing cap in place, and those who will be capped at the new lower rate.

POG asked for clarification around which LA should pay DHP where a claimant had been given temporary accommodation in another LA.

4. Housing Benefit Matching System (HBMS) Capital Rules

DWP explained the impact of the completion of the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) roll out on investigations concerning claimant capital.

As a temporary counter measure, guidance was issued in January 2016.

DWP went on to say that the long term solution will be to transfer the rules to Fraud and Error Service (FES), as the powers to investigate these capital cases fully have already been transferred to FES. Agreement from all parties in DWP to transfer the rules has been confirmed, and the transfer is now progressing.

DWP added that, in the meantime, pre-existing change requests to improve the rules will be delivered. This will increase the number of value bands, and guidance will be issued to LAs before these changes are implemented.

DWP went on to explain the process for notifying LAs.

The meeting discussed compliance cases, and it was agreed to take this issue to the HB Fraud Issue Progression Group.

5. Data Hub

DWP updated the meeting:

- all LAs with one exception are now on board, and that LA should be on board within the following 10 days. (now fully on-boarded).

UC Live Service

- ongoing testing has identified several issues including XML and UC award notifications
- LAs should be able to download XML files into their systems by the end of June.
- duplicate files from UC test data for Local Council Tax Reduction (LCTR) need to be identified and LAs notified.

UC Full Service

- lessons have been learned, and issues identified in Live Service should feed into Full Service
- go-live is anticipated for either the end of week commencing 23 May or the beginning of week commencing 30 May
- the data set for Full Service will be smaller than for Live Service, and will include the HB Stop Notice

- it is planned to automate the HB Stop Notice in the autumn.

Data Transport Appliances (DTAs)

- all data is now flowing through the Data Hub
- collection of the DTAs from LAs will be completed by the end of July 2016.

Glass Cubes

POG members raised some issues around the use of Glass Cube for communication to LAs:

DWP acknowledged POG's concerns, adding that in respect of the missing files, issues had been identified around downloading, and should be resolved in June.

6. Optional Real Time Information (RTI)

DWP updated the meeting:

- provision of optional RTI will commence from 15 June
- cases will be ranked according to the monetary value.

Opting in

DWP explained that in order to comply with the Data Protection Act, LAs must confirm that they wish to participate, and to this end an email has been issued to all LAs. DWP acknowledged the prompt response from LAs. DWP added that Housing Delivery Division (HDD) will contact those LAs to ascertain their reasons for opting out of the scheme and clarify any misconceptions they have.

Subsidy

The meeting discussed the impact on subsidy of optional RTI. It was agreed that the exercise would have no real impact on subsidy. The period available for LAs to action option RTI cases including the 4 week easement commences from the time each individual optional RTI case is opened. No subsidy penalties will be incurred for referrals that are not opened.

DWP explained that draft guidance will be shared with POG, with a view to issuing a circular in early June, and sample files will be shared as soon as possible.

POG members referred to the challenging timetable, particularly around the one day deadline for LAs to opt in.

DWP explained that automation would be too costly as a short term solution.

POG members asked whether optional RTI could be used for LCTR.

7. HB Fraud Issue Progression Group

DWP set out the background to the establishment of this internal governance group. Meetings are robust, honest and challenging. DWP went on to say that the production of meaningful Management Information (MI) was at the top of the list of issues to resolve.

DWP explained that 60% of the 35 recommendations had been closed as completed and resolved, and as the bulk of these had happened by March 2016, HDD is now seeking issues from POG that have occurred after March 2016 to take forward.

8. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Caps in the Social Sector

DWP explained that currently, the focus is on Supported Accommodation and the evidence report. HPD is working with the contractors, and the aim is for clearance before the summer recess. The next stage will be a Ministerial announcement on policy intent, which will initiate a consultation process. Further announcements will be linked to fiscal events such the Budget and Autumn Statement.

DWP went on to say that HPD is working with stakeholders, including Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the devolved administrations, and involving a series of detailed analytical sessions with selected LAs.

A series of 'Round Table' events across England, Scotland and Wales are planned. These 'Round Tables' will sense-check the findings from the evidence report with a range of stakeholders.

POG raised an issue around the application of the Shared Accommodation Rate for under 25s and the impact on those in Supported Accommodation.

9. AOB

POG referred to 2 separate issues concerning Payment Deduction Programme (PDP).

- 1) Where overpayment recovery has been rejected with no reason given.
- 2) Recovery of overpayments in UC and whether an overall strategy for debt in UC is in place. It was agreed that this should be put before the UC LA Steering Group. It was also agreed to invite PDP to attend the next POG meeting.

POG expressed their thanks to the retiring chair of POG for his commitment, fairness and honesty.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 26 July 2016; Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30.

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