



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: DWP Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group

Date: 13 July 2016

Location: Caxton House Room 6.03

Attendees: DWP: Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Manny Ibiayo, Caroline Todd, Adrian Shooter, Catherine Garman, David Slovak, Chris Franks, Natalie Keogh, Mike Keegan, Steve Imeson, Robert Irvine, Darren Bird, David Edson, Mike Bond, Preema Sajadah, Susan Ayres

Dial in: Gary Burns, Neil Sorensen, Nick Wookey

Observers: Diana Lusikila, Janet Hinchcliff

DCLG: No attendees

LAA's: Rose Doran, Paul Ellary, Matthew Evans, Lisa Hayward, Jennifer Wynter

Dial in: Peter Meehan, Howard Mason, Steve Carey

Apologies: Andrew Stevens, Chris Gibbs, Colin Wallbank, Andrew Barbour, David Graaff,

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 May meeting were agreed.

The LAAs noted that issues around Temporary Accommodation management charges are causing concern.

2. Updates:

Housing Policy Division (HPD) Overview

HPD advised on the following priorities:

- regulations for Temporary Absence were laid in week commencing 04 July
- regulations for HB for people aged 18 -21 years have been passed to the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), and once they have been through SSAC, they will be laid in the autumn

The LAAs reiterated their position around the need clarification for 2017/18 in respect of Supported Accommodation.

Housing Delivery Division (HDD) Overview

HDD advised on the following priorities:

- levels of debt
- FERIS 3
- Public Sector Audit Appointments
- DCLG: retention of Business Rates
- the publication of a new document on New Burdens, including how New Burdens can be evaluated in the future.

Universal Credit (UC)

DWP updated the meeting on the following:

- UC has carried out a series of engagement workshops with phase 1 and phase 2 starter local authorities (LAs).

The LAAs asked about data regarding benefit capped claimants in receipt of UC.

The LAAs raised an issue around Temporary Accommodation, and in particular whether LAs can be granted Trusted Partner status, as the current position, particularly in London is creating concern.

3. Underpayments

DWP set out:

- the level of underpayments from 2010 to the present, broken down into claimant and official error
- the main causes of underpayments
- Where Housing Benefit (HB) underpayments are occurring
- HB Strategy activities that support reducing underpayments.

The LAAs pointed out the risk of an increase in underpayments as HB moves into UC, and cases become more complex. They added that take up could become an issue due to the impact of conditionality for UC. DWP explained that in respect of underpayments in UC relating to housing costs, more analysis is needed to understand how UC affects underpayments in HB.

The LAAs asked whether Real Time Information (RTI) could be used to identify underpayments, particularly in light of changing working patterns resulting in multiple changes in income. DWP explained that currently RTI is focused on overpayments but the introduction of optional RTI and Wider Use of RTI (WURTI) will create alerts for any changes in income including reductions.

4. Take- Up

Prompting a discussion, DWP set out:

- what is known about HB take-up in the UK, taken from statistics released on 28 June 2016
- some of the main reasons for non take-up
- some ideas that have been used outside of the UK to increase take-up.

Initiating the discussion, DWP pointed out the key role to be played by outside organisations. Other key points from the discussion included:

- emerging detail from the Poverty Truth Commission around the proliferation of negative media stories and images
- stigmatisation which impacts on those in work who could claim but are unwilling to do so
- differing attitudes between landlords in the social and private rented sectors
- the need for broader links with DCLG, particularly with reference to London rent levels in the private rented sector, combined with an increase in rogue landlords
- difficulties in producing meaningful data
- the increase in automation represented by UC should help take-up, as will UC's aim to transition people into work
- concern around child poverty and the need to develop best practice
- concern around HB for pensioners, a proportion of whom remain unwilling to claim due to ideas and perceptions around stigmatisation.

5. HB Debt

DWP set out:

- UC policy in relation debt, showing the maximum amounts that can be deducted per month
- the priority order of deductions
- the risk to recovery levels
- an analysis of debt recoveries
- the Payment Deductions Programme LA interface which is planned for delivery on 01 August 2016
- some examples of how debt recovery remains a priority for DWP.

DWP explained the key difference between UC and legacy benefits. DWP went on to say that the overall intent is to support people back into work.

DWP added that:

- it has commissioned a range of analytical studies with the intention to produce a debt forecast for the next five years
- an updated Service Level Agreement (SLA) between Debt Management and LAs is under review
- Tax Credit debt has been brought into UC.

6. Communications

DWP explained that the Strategic Engagement Team – part of the Communications Directorate are re-setting what the team does by focusing on the key stakeholders who they believe they could work with and would want to work with them on improving communications. This in no way is intended to usurp existing relationships and established communications channels.

DWP highlighted:

- corporate focus groups on communications are being set up
- a corporate review of communications such as Touchbase is ongoing
- social media activity such as a blog on .gov.uk is being considered
- campaigns such as 'Full Employment' are taking place.

DWP went on to say that the intention is to focus on common touch points between itself and the local government community. The LAAs agreed that Local Government Association (LGA), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Welsh LGA can act as conduits, and they will identify their communications contacts.

7. HB Certification Arrangements

DWP set out:

- the background to the changes following the abolition of the Audit Commission, and the certification arrangements passing to the Public Sector Audit Appointment (PSAA)
- the criteria for selecting the right option
- summaries of the seven options with descriptions and pros and cons
- how this will impact on DWP and the next steps to be taken.

DWP emphasised the importance of effective engagement with LA Section 151 Officers.

The meeting went on to discuss the various options, looking at assurance for 2017/18, and the development of an in house option for 2018/19, as well as a long term approach.

The LAAs asked about Fraud and Error in respect of subsidy. DWP explained that it would want to retain the same arrangements, with areas for improvement in future, once the new arrangements are bedded in.

COSLA pointed out that Scotland is not subject to the same level of change, as Audit Scotland remains as a body. DWP agreed, and made it clear that neither Scotland nor Wales would be subject to this change. DWP also pointed out that discussions have already taken place with Audit Scotland and the Wales Audit Office who agree with DWP's approach, as well as the need for consistency across England, Scotland and Wales.

A circular is planned for September.

8. Benefit Cap

DWP explained that following the last Steering Group meeting, the Benefit Cap Changes project had engaged with an additional 25 LAs specifically on the implementation approach.

DWP set out:

- the background to the options for implementation
- the factors setting the parameters for the options
- the four options
- consideration and recommendation.

The following key points from the discussion were:

- the LAAs agreed in principle to option 1, LA caseload volume low to high, although more detail is needed around scheduling and exceptions
- from A Day all existing Benefit Caps will need to be recalculated using the new cap, and the new amount will start from the next assessment period

- the scan will identify exempt cases.

An action point was taken for the Benefit cap project to provide LAs with detailed week by week schedules and IT assurance.

Key points from the discussion were:

- potential issues around staff capacity over the Christmas period
- concern over the timeframe which could clash with LAs annual billing
- London Councils will work with the Benefit Cap around contingencies for London
- there will be no change to existing arrangements for information exchange between LAs and JCP
- with regard to UC, there was concern over the flow of information which will impact on planning, particularly around Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)
- whether unused DHP funding can be carried over.

It was agreed that DHPs will be discussed at the September Steering Group meeting.

9. AOB

WuRTi: Following the update in March the Project has engaged with the six volunteer authorities to consider how to test the WuRTi service from the Autumn. The Project plans to report further progress to the LAA Steering Group in September.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LAA Steering Group will take place on 14 September 2016 in Caxton House room 6.03 starting at 11.00.

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