



Summary Minutes

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

Date: 17 January 2017

Location: Caxton House Room LG 05/06

Attendees: DWP: Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Adrian Shooter, Catherine Garman, Hayley Johnson-Hurst, Chris Franks, Jason Perrott, Andrew Hibble, Martin Little, Alan Brown (observer)

Dial in: Caroline Todd, Bethany Staff, Kay Bendell, Sheena Parker, Phil Eskdale-Lord, Pamela Thompson, Paul Moad, Victor Dockree, Nicola Young, Kirsty Mason

DCLG: Mercy Adebisi

LAAs: Sonika Sidhu, Alex Sewell, Ian Jones, Andrew Croucher,

Dial in: Steve Carey, Peter Meehan, Lisa Hayward

Apologies: Rose Doran, Matthew Evans, Chris Gibbs, Howard Mason, Paul Ellary, Andrew Stevens, Andrew Barbour, Colin Wallbank

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 November meeting were agreed.

Outstanding actions were cleared.

2. Updates:

Housing Policy Division (HPD) Overview

DWP highlighted the following key areas, acknowledging that April 2017 will be a very busy time for Local Authorities (LAs):

- letters have been issued to the LAAs to begin the consultation on the draft regulations following the Supreme Court judgments in respect of the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy
- regarding Limiting Support to 2 Children, the comments from the Local Government Association (LGA) have been gratefully received

- Bereavement Support Payments will be introduced from April. Letters will be issued to the LAAs setting out the treatment of such payments in Housing Benefit (HB)
- regarding Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) allocation 2017/18, HPD has responded to queries raised by London Councils and the Greater London Authority. DWP is responsible for allocations for England and Wales. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) is engaged with the Scottish Government
- the consultation on Supported Accommodation will run until 13th February.

The LAAs referred to the Temporary Accommodation Management Fee and the new Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) funding stream, asking whether this will mean changes to the Subsidy Order, or HB legislation, and whether any guidance would be issued, particularly around the devolved administrations.

Housing Delivery Division (HDD) Overview

DWP advised on the following key areas:

Funding:

- the Funding Schedule for 2017/18 was issued in December, and there is an intention to issue the schedule for 2018/19 at an earlier date
- discussions with DCLG will need to take place in respect of disaggregation of Council Tax Reduction (CTR) from joint HB/CTR claims.

Engagement

- HDD is in the process of mapping all contacts and relationships with local government
- the aim is to create a more coherent structure.

The LAAs pointed out that this is a timely exercise, citing the increasing impact of the welfare reforms on UC delivery. The LGA agreed to seek feedback from LAs.

With regard to welfare reforms, the LAAs pointed out recent slippages in the lead - in time for changes to software. DWP pointed out that it has engaged with software suppliers. DWP acknowledged the general point concerning the need for adequate lead-in times for changes to software, adding that consequences of policy on delivery needed to be factored into early Impact Assessments.

Fraud & Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS)

DWP updated the meeting:

- consultation on FERIS design has taken place
- the launch has been delayed; a factor being Practitioners' Operational Group's (POG) views to align FERIS 3 with the roll out for Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI), expressed at its November meeting
- further communications will be issued by the end of January.

DWP explained that the funding mechanism could be significantly changed, and it is also planned to automate Optional RTI to maximise the functionality.

DWP went on to say that the changes in funding arrangements could mean the removal of the application process, with LAs opting in.

The LAAs asked about DWP's commitment to targets for underpayments. DWP explained that it has targets for underpayments, and that WURTI should prove a useful tool in identifying underpayments.

Universal Credit (UC)

DWP updated the meeting on the following:

- data is being gathered with 4 LAs on the impacts of UC on Temporary Accommodation. The final version of the report will be shared with the Steering Group
- the UC LA Steering Group met in January. The meeting took the form of a workshop covering a range of issues. Action points from the workshop are being progressed, and the next meeting will address issues raised
- work is underway to look at ways to improve on how the wider narrative is communicated, including the use of circulars to impart information to all LAs
- Phase 3 for Full Service is progressing and is live in 44 Jobcentres. The roll out schedule was published on the .gov website in November
- work continues on shaping the Management Information needed from LAs to evidence and support grant funding for Universal Support and enable the development of future policy.
- the subsequent round of LA engagement events will commence on 27 January in Birmingham and continue on 31 January in London (Caxton House).

DCLG

DCLG updated the meeting on some key areas:

- the Minister has approved the provisional allocations for the distribution of the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) Administration Subsidy
- once this has been cleared by HM Treasury, payment is planned for the end of the financial year, with final allocations published in May
- the Council Tax Prescribed Regulations came into force on 15 January, with LAs notified on 10 January
- it is planned to revisit these regulations in the autumn.

3. HB Debt

DWP set out:

Recent activity including:

- briefing senior DWP leaders on the overall picture, challenges and complexities, highlighting the need to ensure debt (including HB) is considered as a Departmental priority
- feedback on agreed next steps to be provided at the next meeting
- HDD's intentions around future funding to support HB debt recovery activity
- communications on HB debt recovery from UC
- work ongoing with volunteer LAs.

Next steps including:

- initial analysis on the impact of UC, and ongoing analysis to inform any revision to activities and strategies in place
- senior level engagement
- development of a HB debt specific strategy for discussion with key stakeholders, including the LA community.

In discussion the following points were raised:

LAs will be key to creating a single conversation

- as a result of initiatives to combat fraud and error such as FERIS, RTI and WURTI, debt stocks are increasing due to the volumes of overpayments identified
- LAs are being encouraged to find increasing levels of debt, and this could impact on LA subsidy

- a breakdown of the overall percentages of debt, showing the percentage of HB debt would be helpful.

4. WURTI

DWP set out:

- the background to discussions around the roll out, including input from POG, and the 6 test LAs.
- The revised roll out proposals:

Possible New Burdens, broken down into:

- Employee Authentication Service (EAS) processes
- training
- changes to online forms
- any ongoing new burden requirements, to be evaluated from the 6 test sites.

Next Steps:

- guidance for LAs in respect of EAS
- wider communications including the use of HB Direct
- to bring the conclusions from the test sites evaluation to the March LAA Steering Group.

The LAAs pointed out that the test LAs are experiencing an increase in work activity due to fluctuating alerts.

5. Limiting Support to 2 Children

DWP highlighted the key elements of the policy, including:

- when it comes into force
- the rules around who it will affect
- interaction with HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC).

The LAAs asked about the timeline for implementation and about arrangements for Scotland.

6. Future Audit Arrangements 2018/19

DWP outlined how the new HB Assurance Process will work, and that the methodology should look and feel as it does at present.

DWP explained the tripartite arrangements for procurement of accountancy services which LAs will need to undertake over the summer, for auditors to be in place by the deadline of 28 February 2018.

DWP added that the assurance Instructions to be issued in March will be broadly similar to the existing instructions.

The meeting discussed whether there would be any scope for auditors to offer opinions. DWP explained that the report would be based on their findings, drawing no conclusions.

7. Personal Support Package

DWP set out:

- the background to the Personal Support Package for people with health conditions, including the Local Supported Employment Proof of Concept
- reference to the 'Improving Lives' Green paper, and the relevant passage from the Green Paper
- the next steps including:
 - defining, developing and evaluating the Local Supported Employment Proof of Concept in partnership with 8 selected LAs, which can then be scaled up for all LAs
 - issuing specification and selection criteria in February 2017 inviting expressions of interest from LAs to deliver Local Supported Employment provision
 - available funding to test deliverability over 18 months working with a number of LAs.

DWP added that discussions with the devolved administrations are underway.

8. AOB

No items of AOB were brought forward.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LAA Steering Group will take place on 15 March 2017 in Caxton House room Lower Ground 5/6 starting at 11.00.

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