



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 29 March 2017

Location: Caxton House Room LG 5/6

Attendees: **DWP: Adrian Shooter** (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Darren Baker, Chris Franks, Kath Murphy, Diana Lusikila,

Dial-in: Paul Selby, Paul Moad, Kay Bendell, Sharon Young, Andrew Stocks, Shirley Dean, Adrian Landeg

LAAs: Paul Ellary (RB Kensington & Chelsea), June Deans (Glasgow), Mark Gillmore (EK Services), Chris Boylett (LB Hackney), Gwynn Thomas (Westminster)

Dial-in: Adrian Mills (Anglia Revenues), Pamela Richardson (Gateshead), Jean Cheeseman (South Bucks)

Apologies: Les Robertson (Fife), Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank (Welsh LGA), Andrew Hyatt (RB Kensington & Chelsea), Charles Taylor (East Renfrewshire), Iain Marshalsay (Ceredigion), Paula Doherty (Dumfries & Galloway), Matthew Evans (Wrexham)

1. **Welcome and Introductions:**

DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialling in.

Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed. POG requested that Local Authorities (LAs) represented on POG are named in future minutes.

Action Points

January 01 2017: This concerns the initiation of discussion between Housing Policy Division (HPD), Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Scottish Government on Supported Accommodation post 2020. The action point remains ongoing, and HPD will be asked to provide a paper for the next POG meeting.

2. Amendment to the Fraud and Error Service (FES) Service Level Agreement (SLA)

DWP explained that the SLA has been in place for a lengthy period and is in need of refreshing to put achievable outcomes and timescales in place.

DWP proposed a workshop to take place at the end of April, with representation from LAs, (POG members), Housing Delivery Division (HDD) and FES.

POG members referred to discussions which took place last year concerning the sharing of Management Information (MI) with LAs. They asked if any progress has been made, as MI would inform any review of the SLA.

DWP explained that the data needs to undergo a thorough Quality Assurance (QA) process. Work on this is ongoing, and it is anticipated that MI should be available to share around mid May.

3. Administrative Penalties

DWP informed the meeting of changes to Administrative Penalties being introduced from 01 May 2017. The changes are to the thresholds for prosecutions and Administrative Penalties.

POG members asked how LAs will be notified of the change. DWP explained that an item will be published in the General Information Bulletin.

POG members made the following observations:

- the higher threshold for the Administrative Penalty will impact on levels of debt
- this could affect any decision by LAs to accept of the penalty on grounds of cost effectiveness
- recoverability would be a key issue for LAs as they look to their HB debt balance.

The meeting discussed the rationale behind the changes to the thresholds.

4. Debt Update

DWP highlighted the following key points:

- data for February 2017, including the amount allocated to Universal Credit (UC) is currently undergoing validation by analysts

- it is planned to share the analysis in April 2017 with a teleconference with a POG member to run through the data and then to share the with POG
- this analysis can then be regularly updated.

POG members agreed that this should be cleared by correspondence before issuing it to all LAs.

5. Debt Management (DM) Data Cleanse

DWP set out proposals to conduct a data cleansing exercise with LA sites using 2 of the main LA IT suppliers.

DWP explained that the LA interface software had been delivered to the 3 main LA IT suppliers, and that one of them had performed an automated data matching exercise. LAs using this supplier then contacted DM to correct any anomalies, thereby performing a data cleanse exercise. This has meant that these LAs have seen significantly less rejections of recalls and revisions as their reference numbers have been aligned with DM records. Consequently it is proposed that a similar data cleansing exercise should take place with the other 2 software supplier's sites

POG members were broadly supportive of the proposal, pointing out that this would be in LAs interest. They asked whether Debt Management could provide a contact for LAs with specific problems. They also pointed out that the exercise would be resource intensive; consequently, asking LAs to commit to a turnaround time of one month could prove unrealistic.

The meeting discussed the roll out and suggested that smaller LAs should go first. POG members pointed out that LAs would need an idea of expected volumes. It was also recommended that the roll out should be aligned with the roll out schedule for Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI).

The meeting discussed communications which POG members stated could be issued directly to LAs and not via themselves.

6. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) Monitoring

DWP explained the current DHP monitoring process, whereby LAs are asked to outline their spend on DHPs and how it is apportioned to specific welfare reforms, and for which purpose.

DWP explained the proposed changes to the process for 2017/18, in which LAs will be asked for additional information. The changes are required to help understand demand for DHPs at a national level.

The additional information being requested is:

- where possible, the number of awards, and to which specific welfare reform they are allocated
- where possible, the total number of DHP applications received for each welfare reform, whether successful or not.

DWP added that for 2017/18 it is proposed to amend the categories by which LAs record the purpose for which each DHP award has been granted. DWP noted that guidance will need to be issued as soon as possible.

POG members explained that this was too late for the first week in April, as LA IT software suppliers will need to be consulted in respect of changes to the categories. POG members added that localised spreadsheets may be available, and LAs can be asked on a voluntary basis. They also asked about funding for any changes to software.

7. Communications

DWP put forward a recommendation for testing issuing email alerts that contain a hyperlink to the routine communications on GOV.UK rather than include the communication itself as an attachment.

DWP explained that the change has been driven by the loss of access to its current mass mailing database on 31 March 2017, and the date for the introduction of a new solution has not yet been confirmed. Consequently there is a need to establish how best to continue issuing communications to LAs in the most efficient way.

POG members broadly agreed the recommendation, and offered the following suggestions:

- a housekeeping exercise regarding mailing lists could be helpful; to email LAs asking them to confirm who they want to receive routine communications. The email could confirm those who are already receiving routine communications
- to ensure that the email subject headings are clear and the hyperlink is placed in the email.

DWP also referred to F Circulars, explaining that the distribution list will need to be refreshed. These circulars will need to be renamed, as they now cover a much wider range of issues and products.

8. LAA Steering Group/UC LA Steering Group

DWP explained that as part of an overall review of the engagement process, it has been recommended that the UC LA Steering Group and the Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group should be merged. The key drivers behind this change are:

- to create an overarching framework moving forward
- to rationalise agendas to avoid overlapping and duplicating topics.

DWP explained that this had been discussed with and agreed by the LAA Steering Group, and that it will be discussed at the next UC LA Steering Group.

DWP explained that the scope for POG would need to be widened to reflect the merger of the 2 major consultative strategic forums. With regard to membership, a good cross section would be required to ensure that it is not London centric. The devolved administrations will continue to be represented.

DWP outlined some initial thoughts on how the meetings will look.

DWP added that the next LAA Steering Group and UC LA Steering Group meeting are planned to be the final ones in their current format.

POG members were concerned that the large number of HB related operational issues should not be lost, and that the scope for each forum must be appropriate, particularly the strategic remit for any Steering Group. Terms of Reference will need to be redrafted.

POG members added that LA membership could be drawn from a pool of people with specific skill sets.

9. Real Time Information (RTI) Funding 2017/18

DWP explained that a Subsidy Circular is being prepared for issue in May 2017.

DWP went on to confirm the total funding which will be available to cover approximately 40,000 cases per month. The funding will run from May to September 2017, coinciding with the roll out of WURTI. Funding will be paid upfront and then offset against actuals.

DWP then updated the meeting on further New Burdens, additional to the published funding schedule. These being:

- WURTI implementation.
- Bereavement payments.
- Limiting Support in HB to 2 Children.
- Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy following the Supreme Court judgment.

10. PDP Revisions

DWP explained that it is seeking POG's views on how best to improve LA responses to requests for information and when commissioning LA activity in respect of key DWP projects.

In response, POG members made the following points:

- it is important to know who in the LA has received the communication
- email headers should include an 'Action By' notice and all communications should be clear on what is required of the LA
- multiple platforms for communication can lead to inefficient dissemination of messages.
- it would be helpful if Revenues and Benefit Managers could have an overview of all communications.

DWP explained that it could be possible to include a feature in monthly bulletins to include all the different commissions that have been asked of LAs.

11. AOB

POG members raised an issue around Circular G3 2017 – Salary Sacrifice.

They said that more detailed guidance was needed around disregards; pension contributions and childcare disregards.

POG members also raised an issue around ATLAS, in respect of the end year process for LCTR.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 31 May 2017 Caxton House Room Lower Ground 2.30. 10.30 – 12.30.

Subsequent to these minutes, the meeting scheduled for 31 May was cancelled due to pre election period of Purdah.

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