

Housing Benefit Direct issue 159 June 2015



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Editorial

I write this as we approach the deadline for applications for Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) Maintenance Fund payments. If experience of the Start-up Fund is anything to go by, we are going to be quite busy over the next couple of weeks getting through the last minute bids. Please bear with us while we try to process these as quickly as we can. We have learned a lot from experience and bids are getting through the process a lot more smoothly but we still have a challenge dealing with the volumes of applications. Not that we are complaining. We are really pleased to see the on-going level of commitment to tackling fraud and claimant error among the local authority (LA) community. Early results from FERIS are encouraging but we know that most LAs could only really build up a head of steam on their activities right at the end of the Financial Year and so we will start to see even better results soon.

The preliminary estimates of fraud and error in the benefits system were published on 14 May and can be found [here](#). These are based on a sample of claims examined between October 2013 and September 2014, notably before Real Time Information or FERIS activity kicked in. A small, and expected, increase in Housing Benefit (HB) fraud and error is recorded, showing an increase from 6.0% to 6.1% overpayments. A new methodology for presenting the HB statistics has been introduced to net off underpayments (in line with the methodology used for other benefits) which leads to an overpayment rate of 5.7%. This shows we are right to keep our focus on improving the accuracy of claims.

Sticking with the FERIS theme, this edition of HB Direct includes information on the “campaign in a box” toolkit which we will be making available to all LAs who wish to use it from July. Hopefully, this will support your local publicity campaigns to encourage claimants to report changes of circumstance. It also includes a prompt about the software being developed by the three main IT suppliers and funded through the FERIS Bid Fund to enable LAs to better identify changes of circumstance. This functionality will be free of charge to users. More detail is available from the suppliers.

Thank you to all those LAs who submitted their initial final subsidy claims by 30 April helping us comply with HM Treasury requirements. Thank you also to everyone who attended our very successful subsidy workshops, we have taken away the points that were made and plan to let you know our conclusions as soon as possible. We are planning further workshops in 2015/16.

Clare Elliott

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[Distribution enquiries](#)

LA Subsidy Workshops

Articles in HB Direct in August and September 2014 announced the holding of a series of workshops to discuss issues leading to subsidy claim qualifications and the means of addressing these issues. This article provides an update regarding the workshops.

A total of ten workshops were held throughout the country, beginning in September 2014 and ending in February 2015. Each workshop generated highly productive discussions and we agreed to take away a number of points for further consideration. Representatives of the external audit organisations attended all but the first workshop and answered numerous questions from LA representatives.

We subsequently produced an [HB Subsidy Claims LA Best Practice Guide](#). The Guide not only listed the examples of best practice put forward by LAs but also included those points taken away for further consideration. It is our intention to resolve these points by 30 June 2015; the resolution of these points will be posted on GOV.UK as soon as possible and announced via the HB General Information Bulletin.

LA feedback on the workshops was extremely positive, with a large number of LAs requesting further workshops in 2015/16 and some LAs suggesting that the workshops be held on an annual basis.

We have decided to hold further workshops in 2015/16. It is intended to hold these workshops in a number of locations spread across the country. An article in a future issue of HB Direct will provide further details and will invite expressions of interest.

Any LA wishing to obtain further information at this point in time should contact Michael Mina at the following e-mail address: michael.mina@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Subsidy and Discretionary Housing Payment Final Claims

In issue 156 of [HB Direct](#) sent out in February 2015 we included a reminder regarding the deadline of 30 April 2015 for submission of HB initial final subsidy claims and Discretionary Housing Payment final claims.

This deadline reflects wider governmental accounting and HM Treasury requirements. Once again, the vast majority of LAs succeeded in submitting their claims by the deadline, thereby enabling us to comply with these requirements. We recognise and are extremely grateful for the considerable efforts of LAs in this regard.

Changes to departmental postal addresses

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is continuing to modernise how it receives and processes post with two new mail opening units opening that will be able to provide this service. As a result of this extension, there are changes to the postal addresses of over 300 offices. From June 2015 the Attendance Allowance Unit and Carer's Allowance Unit (Carer's claims included) will also have new details.

More information and a list of the offices' new addresses are available by selecting: [postal addresses](#).

All external partners, including LAs, should use the new Business Reply Envelopes which can be obtained in the usual way.

Audit Commission closure

The Local Government Association (LGA) has set up Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) (which is independent from the LGA) to take on some Audit Commission key statutory functions from 1 April 2015 to ensure amongst other work that councils, emergency services and health bodies will still benefit from high quality local public audit at a cost effective price. For further information, visit the PSAA [website](#) or email info@psaa.co.uk

HB fraud and error 'campaign in a box'

As part of our on-going commitment to support LAs to respond effectively to FERIS, I am pleased to announce that we will soon make available a HB fraud and error 'campaign in a box'. This toolkit will provide tailored resources and written guidance to allow LAs to download templates from our existing Housing Delivery Division portal and develop your own local publicity campaigns to encourage claimants to report changes of circumstances.

The campaign toolbox will consist of:

- campaign briefing document and guidance for LAs
- posters (various scales)
- leaflet – used as door drop and insert
- bus adverts – internal passenger panel & back panels
- pull-up banner artwork – for local events
- social media assets/basic content, e.g. Facebook
- support for any proposed press releases

We hope to make the material available during July 2015.

If you have queries on this article please email alan.sullivan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

FERIS IT Software

You will be aware of new IT software being developed by Northgate, Capita and Civica to support FERIS. The software is being developed following successful bids to the FERIS Bid Fund by lead LAs. The FERIS Decision Making Forum approved each bid on the basis that the functionality would support LAs to achieve their FERIS thresholds by helping to identify change in circumstances to HB claims and reduce the amount of benefit being paid.

The new functionality is free of charge to LAs as the software is being funded directly by DWP, although there may be minimal costs incurred by LAs as part of the implementation process. The new functionality will enable LAs to identify high risk cases for intervention and automatically issue notifications to claimants to confirm their details. Full details of each solution can be found in communications/bulletins issued to you by your IT supplier as follows:

- Northgate – Information Bulletin – Issue 1188
- Capita – Email transmissions 2015 – 009, 2015-011 and 2015-020
- Civica – Civica OR 020.15

Please be ready to use the new tools as they become available and attend/participate in training and awareness sessions being run by the suppliers.

If you have any concerns and/or questions please email the FERIS project at FERIS.team@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Performance Measurement Team – changes to how we will work with LAs on the HB review work process

After consulting with Practitioners' Operational Group members, a number of measures to improve LA engagement with the HB review process, in particular to improve agreement of potential errors have been implemented;

- the LA representative is now referred to as the Error Control Officer (ECO), aligning the role with all DWP benefits that it reviews
- the roles and responsibilities of the ECO are outlined during the initial contact from the Performance Measurement (PM) visiting team manager
- PM has strengthened the secure decision notification process with the introduction of a 'receipting' function on the database
- PM are providing a calculation of the error value and an explanation of why it considers the HB award to have a potential error
- PM are issuing reminders 5 working days from the date it made the LA aware of the error and copying this to the Benefits and Revenues Manager
- with the aim of improving the feedback loop on final outcomes, PM has improved the decision notice to provide final outcomes on all disputed cases
- PM provide a summary report following the completion of the LA review which is intended to improve the visibility of HB review outcomes.

If you have any queries on this article please contact Hamish Robertson tel: 07825 283033 or email hamish.j.robertson@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
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