

Housing Benefit Direct issue 170 September 2016



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Editorial

The Scottish IRRV conference next week, for me, heralds the end of summer; though I am sure the sun will still be shining over Crieff. Unfortunately, I won't be there this year but there will be a good Department for Work and Pensions' presence so, if you are there, do come and talk to us and share your successes and concerns. I am looking forward to the conference in Telford in October however and hope to get the chance to talk to as many local authorities (LAs) as possible. There is so much going on and so much to talk about. Over the next few months we will be looking forward to the publication of Housing Benefit (HB) debt and recoveries statistics and to estimates of Fraud and Error (F&E) for 2015/16. My hope is that we will continue to see reductions in F&E but this will inevitably mean higher debt; something which is very high on my priorities list at the moment, as I know it is yours.

As you can see from the article on 'Continuing our focus on Fraud and Error' the Performance Development Team (PDT) is doing lots this year to support LAs' activities to target levels of F&E in the HB system. Some of you may have already been involved in the F&E Good Practice Workshops and we are very pleased with the positive feedback we received from these. The engagement exercise that the PDT consultants are about to undertake will build on the success of the initial Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS), support realisation of the benefits from the 16/17 scheme and also help inform the design of the 17/18 scheme 'FERIS 3'! We value the way LAs are working together with us on all of this.

This edition also includes a call for LA secondees to come and support us, we currently have three secondees and they have all brought invaluable in-depth knowledge and insight which can only help us work with LAs effectively in the future. There are also secondees working on Housing Policy and Universal Credit to name but two areas, so why not get in touch if you are interested.

One of our secondees, Victor, has written an article this month on future plans for the certification of HB. The current arrangements with Public Sector Audit Appointments will come to an end with the completion of the 2017/18 audit and certification work and Victor is working with us to engage stakeholders to identify the options from 2018/19 onward. The current thinking is that we will use tripartite agreements. We will keep you informed as the work progresses and will continue to consult both the LA Associations Steering Group and Practitioners' Operational Group, some information on these is also included in this edition.

Clare Elliot

[Distribution and newsletter enquiries](#)

Performance Measurement Reviews process

Since the initial design of Housing Benefit Reviews (HBR), Performance Measurement (PM) has always sought to have a digital solution with local authorities (LAs) to gather the information needed to carry out reviews. However, IT constraints and security issues such as the transfer of information between LAs and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) via email have prevented this continuous improvement from taking place.

As a consequence of several digital upgrades to the systems, we identified an opportunity to make changes to improve and secure the information exchange. On a trial basis PM worked together with a number of LAs, where together both parties learnt how to make the most of the improved digital infrastructure across Northgate, Civica and Academy data systems.

This established a process that supported the digital agenda and delivered:

- reduced numbers of vast paper data sent out
- reduced volumes of contact through LA visit and impact on workstations, printers and system navigation support by shifting data exchange to electronic channel
- reduced numbers of security issues and postal costs by removing the risks of documentation going missing in the post.

Outcome

Following successful trials and working in partnership to improve the process, including the provision of a PM Single Point of Contact (SPoC), it was further established that the transfer of data by email was efficient, safe and secure; with PM staff supporting LA colleagues, where needed, through the mechanics of the process.

Details of the process and outcome of the trials were presented to the Practitioners' Operational Group (POG). Following a period of review and consultation POG has now agreed that implementation of this new process can commence from Visit 1 of the 2016/2017 HB measurement programme.

PM Visiting Team managers will contact their LA counterparts 6 to 8 weeks prior to the commencement of visits within their respective areas to arrange a suitable date to undertake a profile meeting. At this meeting LA managers will be provided with full details of the lower level process for the electronic transfer of prints as well as their PM SPoC for the visits. There is no need to contact PM visiting team managers about these changes in advance as each LA will be contacted in turn as their position in the HB measurement programme comes around.

In the meantime, if you have any general questions regarding the content of this article please email john.murray4@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Further LA Subsidy Workshops

Given the success of the LA Subsidy Workshops held in 2014/15 and 2015/16, and in response to LA requests, we are considering holding a series of workshops in 2016/17. Locations are yet to be decided but it is our intention to have as wide a geographical spread as possible.

In light of suggestions made by a number of LAs during the 2015/16 workshops, we are proposing to hold two types of workshop in 2016/17; one for 'LA staff new to subsidy' and one for 'LA staff more experienced in subsidy'.

Workshops for LA staff new to subsidy

These workshops will provide an introduction to subsidy, focusing on:

- arrangements for claiming and payment of subsidy
- applicable deadlines
- the mechanics of the final subsidy claim form
- the responsibilities of LAs (including the completion and oversight of subsidy forms), DWP and auditors
- an overview of certification arrangements.

Workshops for LA staff more experienced in subsidy

It is intended that these workshops will focus primarily on certification issues. We recognise, however, that the workshops in 2014/15 and 2015/16 gave considerable coverage to the certification process. Therefore, we are keen to address specific subsidy/certification issues which have not been dealt with previously.

If you would like to attend one of these workshops please email michael.mina@dwp.gsi.gov.uk with your 'expression of interest' and state clearly which workshop you would like to attend. Additionally, if you are expressing an interest in the 'Workshops for LA staff more experienced in subsidy' we would be grateful if you could also suggest specific subjects/issues which you would like to discuss.

Reminder for LAs to report Discretionary Housing Payment mid-year monitoring returns 2016/17

As requested in Bulletin [G8/2016](#), this is a reminder for LAs to report on their Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) expenditure 1 April 2016 to 30 September 2016.

You should complete and return the form which can be found [here](#) by 14 October 2016. Returns and any queries regarding the form should be sent to dhp.monitoringinbox@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Secondment Opportunity: DWP Housing Delivery Division

The Department is currently undertaking a huge programme of welfare reform. Working with LAs, who are one of our major stakeholders, continues to feature heavily and for this reason we value the expertise and knowledge that LA HB experts can bring to the team. These secondment opportunities will in turn provide an opportunity to gain an insight and experience of policy development and workings of central government.

Housing Delivery Division (HDD) has begun an on-going programme of bringing HB experts from LAs in to work alongside Data Sharing, Subsidy, Change and Performance teams on secondment. We are looking to recruit a number of LA employees onto the programme over the next 12 months.

HDD comprises of approximately 100 staff. The Division is responsible for overseeing the performance of LAs in their delivery of HB (circa £24 billion), allocating HB admin subsidy (circa £260 million) and DHPs (circa £125 million). HDD monitor a range of performance data including how quickly and accurately HB is paid and the prevention and detection of fraud and error. HDD offer support and challenge to those LAs not meeting performance expectations.

It also supports a large program of data sharing activity that is paramount in helping LAs pay the correct amount of HB and is heavily involved in managing change activity supporting the welfare reform agenda.

This is an exciting opportunity to play a leading role in maintaining and improving stakeholder relationships between DWP and LAs and in designing innovative opportunities for closer working during this busy and complex period of welfare reform.

Personal requirements

Candidates should possess the following:

- good understanding of HB procedures and regulations
- good drafting and communication skills
- ability to build and maintain effective working relationships with LAs and other stakeholders
- ability to work with people at different levels in the organisation and to work as part of a team to achieve results
- ability to deliver work and pace and with successful, quantifiable outcomes

Further Information

Secondment posts would be offered for 6 months initially but this will be reviewed at the end of the period and could be extended for up to a maximum of two years. The posts are full time and based across the country, although no moves at public expense would be considered. The roles in question will be determined by business need so your CV will be kept on file and you will be contacted once a suitable opportunity arises.

If you are keen to register your interest and are at S01/S02/SO3 and Pay Band level 4 or equivalent, (roughly equates to civil service HEO/SEO/G7 grades) please:

- check with your LA that you can be released; and then
- send your CV by email to Philip.j.sharples@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

If you would like to have a chat about this opportunity you can telephone Darren Baker on 020 7449 5375.

Certification of HB subsidy claims

Following the abolition of the Audit Commission, the Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government delegated statutory functions (from the Audit Commission Act 1998) to Public Sector Audit Appointments, which included the arrangements for the certification of HB subsidy claims. These powers will expire with the completion of the 2017/18 audit and certification work, at which time responsibility for the certification of HB subsidy claims, will transfer to DWP.

Engagement with stakeholders has already begun to examine the potential options for delivery of certification arrangements for 2018/19, so that transition will be seamless and that LAs will have ample time to prepare for any changes that may arise. It is anticipated that certification will likely proceed via tripartite agreements.

Section 151 officers will be aware of the requirement to procure audit services for 2018/19 opinion work as required by the Local Audit & Accountability Act 2014; and that procurement will need to be made by December 2017. However, they also need to be aware that a separate procurement of audit services will need to take place for the certification of their HB subsidy claims. This can be the same auditor appointed for the opinion work or another firm.

The above applies to LAs in England only. LAs in Scotland and Wales will continue to have their HB subsidy claims certified by the auditor appointed by Audit Scotland or the Wales Audit Office.

Further communications to all stakeholders will be issued as details become available.

If you have any questions at this time regarding the content of this article please email victor.dockree@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

DWP and LA consultation groups minutes

LA Associations Steering Group

This is a forum for DWP and LAs to discuss strategic issues relating to HB and LA funding.

Practitioners' Operational Group

The Practitioners' Operational Group reports to the DWP and LA Associations Steering Group and discusses operational issues relating to HB.

Both of these Groups meet separately on a bi-monthly basis and summary minutes of those meetings are published on GOV.UK regularly. They can be found through the following links:

- www.gov.uk/government/groups/dwp-and-local-authority-associations-steering-group
- www.gov.uk/government/groups/dwp-and-local-authorities-practitioners-operations-group

If you have any questions please email mont.goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Continuing our focus on Fraud and Error

All year round our Performance Development Team consultants have on-going engagement with individual LAs on a range of performance matters and will discuss the Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) and fraud and error (F&E) activities as part of those assignments.

This year we have already run 21 national workshops on F&E good practice attended by 570 delegates from 250 authorities, at which all aspects of F&E performance was discussed; focusing in on what was working well and identifying any barriers to better performance. Lessons learnt from this will feed into updates of our good practice guides.

In addition, following completion of the original FERIS and the successful launch of the 2016/17 scheme, the Performance Development Team are about to begin an engagement exercise with a number of LAs. As covered by Circulars [HB A2/2016](#) and [A4/2016](#), we are keen to establish how an authority's FERIS activities, as outlined in their 2015/16 and 2016/17 Maintenance Fund applications, are making a difference to your ability to realise reductions in net weekly entitlement to HB. It is intended that a selection of approximately 80 authorities will be contacted in September to gather information on the specific activities that have been undertaken and to assess what impact this has had.

If you have any questions regarding the content of this article you can email them to feris.team@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Housing Benefit communications products

In previous issues of HB Direct and the General Information Bulletin we explained that we would be moving to a new mass mailing solution and for a temporary period we may need to put contingency arrangements in place to ensure you continued to receive HB communications. Due to an unexpected temporary extension to the current contract we will continue to have access to our existing mass mailing solution until 30 September 2016.

We do expect to move to a new mass mailing solution and it is still possible that we will not have any access to a mass mailing solution for a temporary period, so it has not been a waste of your efforts to set up the email alert subscription on [GOV.UK](#).

It is also our intention to carry out a major housekeeping exercise on all of our mailing lists so we will continue to restrict access to our lists for those communications products that are available on [GOV.UK](#)

We will continue to keep you updated on any developments via this newsletter and the General Information Bulletin but in the meantime if you have any further enquiries please email the [LA Gateway](#) team.