

Housing Benefit Direct issue 172 November 2016



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Editorial

It was a pleasure, as always, to attend the IRRV national conference in Telford last month. I couldn't do my job effectively if I was not listening to local authorities (LAs) and hearing about your current issues and concerns and taking these back to the office to address. For example, I heard that some of the improvements we made to fraud referral processes have not fully bedded in so this is something we need to look at again.

Quite a lot of the content of the day I attended was centred on tackling the growing HB debt stock. The stock of debt has grown by £1 billion over the last 6 years and many of you are now looking at how to maximise recoveries in advance of Universal Credit roll-out. My team is reviewing what more we can do to support you including through direct support, good practice and through enablers like providing employer details for Direct Earnings Attachments. There is more on this in this edition.

Of course, the success of initiatives such as Real Time Information and the Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) is partly behind the growth in debt and we will be looking closely at how we reflect the consequences of fraud and error detection activities as we develop and design any future initiatives. We are currently looking at the design of FERIS for 2017/18 and how to align this with the roll-out of Wider use of Real Time Information (WuRTI), more on this follows. WuRTI will provide real time earnings data which will not only help detect incorrectness but potentially stop it getting in to the system in the first place. We are watching what is coming out from the discovery process to ensure WuRTI works for you and we capture and share any learning for roll-out. We are very grateful to the six volunteer LAs delivering the testing and learning.

This month we will see the publication of the 2015/16 national statistics on fraud and error across the Department for Work and Pensions' benefits. This is always a bit of an anxious wait for me. Until 2014, the trend was very much upward, reflecting an increase in standard, working age caseloads and pressure on resources. The statistics were encouraging last year but we know these pressures have continued and fraud and error could still increase despite our focus. I took some comfort from the fact that the speed of processing statistics published on 26 October 2016 show performance holding steady. I must thank all of you for continuing to focus on delivery, for the benefit of our customers.

Clare Elliott
Head of Housing Delivery Division

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Local authority test of the Wider use of Real Time Information service

Real Time Information (RTI) is an HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) system used to collect Pay As You Earn information from employers and pension providers each time a payment is made to an employee or pensioner. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has introduced the use of RTI data within its business processes to prevent and detect fraud and error resulting from earnings/occupational pensions not being accurately reported by the customer.

The Wider use of RTI (WuRTI) service has developed a web based digital service that will provide direct access to the RTI data held within the HMRC system. The service consists of:

- a User Interface (UI) which Agents will use to view earnings and pensions via a desktop icon
- an Alerts service that will notify Agents when the claimant and / or their partner's income status changes.

Work is in progress to introduce the WuRTI service across all local authorities (LAs) to support the administration of Housing Benefit (HB) at the new claim stage and once the claim is in payment, to verify continued entitlement to HB and prevent fraud and error from entering the benefits system.

The WuRTI Project is using a 'test and learn' approach and is working with six volunteer LAs:

- Flintshire
- Gateshead
- Glasgow
- Kensington & Chelsea
- Leeds
- Wrexham

Representatives from these LAs have been working with the project to introduce the service into their offices and agree the scope of the test being carried out. An eight week test commenced on 17 October 2016; with approximately 40 Agents in the six LAs given access to the RTI data. They will use this data whilst processing live non passported HB new claims, reviews and customer reported changes of circumstances. The Agents will also start to receive Alerts on the cases they have assessed if the income status changes for the customer and/or their partner.

The test is due to complete on 9 December 2016, when a review will be undertaken and key findings used to inform any changes required before the service is rolled out to all LAs during 2017. The initial feedback from the test is positive, with the WuRTI service already identifying undeclared earnings.

If you have any questions regarding the content of this article please email wideruseof.rtisupport@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Recently published statistics and management information

Both the [HB speed of processing statistics](#) and [HB Caseload Management Information \(CMI\)](#) for the period April 2016 to June 2016 was published on Wednesday 26 October 2016.

The national speed of processing performance remains steady

- The average time taken to process new HB claims in quarter 1 of 2016/17 is 24 calendar days, which is the same as quarter 1 of 2015/16.
- The average time taken to process changes of circumstances to HB claims for quarter 1 of 2016/17 is 8 calendar days. This is 1 day lower than what it was in quarter 1 of 2015/16.
- There was a decrease of around 8% in new claims and a 2.3% decrease in changes of circumstances against the same quarter last year; thought to be due to the rollout of Universal Credit Full Service.

CMI

CMI shows the value of reductions in HB achieved over the value of reductions expected. It is an estimate of how well each LA is managing their HB caseload, relative to the top performers. By identifying the changes of circumstances that lead to a reduction to entitlement LAs can prevent or minimise overpayments from occurring, thereby minimising fraud and error.

The percentage of the reductions expected that was achieved for quarter 1 in 2016/17 is the same as the level for quarter 1 in 2015/16 at 73%. There was a slight drop in the total value of

reductions achieved compared to the same quarter in 2015/16, largely due to the fall in the total HB caseload.

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

Changes to our HB pages on GOV.UK

Earlier this year we told you about our plan to review our HB pages on GOV.UK as we'd received some anecdotal feedback that some of our main users were finding the pages difficult to navigate in terms of finding various guidance, good practice and other publications found on those pages.

We've now completed that review and, as a result, we've updated our detailed guide web page (collection of contents landing page) with a new layout that should ensure users find what's available more easily and the associated links intuitive and easy to navigate.

The new layout and links will go-live on Friday 4 Nov 2016.

This will be the new landing page address for our HB pages: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-benefit-information-guidance-and-good-practice-for-local-authority-staff>

All users currently using a bookmarked address to access the existing landing page will be redirected for the foreseeable but we recommend replacing that bookmark with one that takes you directly to the new address.

If you have any questions or, indeed, feedback regarding the new layout please contact valerie.hunt@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Increased Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme incentive payments for 2016/17

In quarter 1, a total of £2.33 million in incentive payments were made to 182 (48%) LAs. This is a vast increase in comparison to the old scheme where only a total of £0.94 million in incentive payments were made to 54 (14%) LAs. This increase was possible because of the changes to the design of the scheme brought in for 2016/17, including:

- a lower starting point to make achieving the lower threshold more attainable and additional increments; increasing the number of thresholds from five to ten, with a 'kick' to pay more to LAs when more fraud and error reductions have been achieved
- adjusting baselines based on HB caseload composition changes and reductions since the period when the baseline was set. In quarter 1 the average adjustment to baselines is a reduction of 5.0%. The result is that incentive scheme payments are more achievable and realistic
- baselines are recalculated using the HB caseload information at the end of each quarter. This takes into account changes to caseload such as on-going rollout and subsequent migration to the full Universal Credit service. If an LA's caseload continues to fall then baselines will be adjusted downward even further. If caseloads increase the adjusted baseline may increase. However, it is still likely to be significantly lower than the original baseline amounts
- to help give an indication of the potential to qualify for an incentive payment LAs can apply the baseline change quoted on the quarter 1 Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) performance letter to the subsequent baseline periods. This will give an indication of what LAs need to deliver to achieve future incentive payments.

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

HB debt held by LAs in Great Britain

HB debt held by LAs' in Great Britain now stands above £1.9 billion. While LAs recovered £0.66 billion during 2015/16, this fell short of the £1.07 billion raised during the same period. While these figures present a challenge to LAs in terms of potential lost revenue, it should be recognised that the positive from this is that LAs' are successfully driving fraud and error out of their caseloads. This is mainly due to the increased activity driven by the RTI initiative and FERIS. If an LA can achieve collection rates above 60%, there is the potential to boost income in times of significant financial pressures.

DWPs' Housing Delivery Division's Performance Development Team (PDT) is keen to support LAs in all areas of HB. We have recently been involved in work specifically looking at HB debt recovery; working with groups of LAs and through individual LA assignments.

Increasing collection levels of HB debt is never an easy journey, but PDT has successfully identified a number of areas where LAs can improve recovery rates. Ensuring that each case has a recovery plan is the first building block of effective debt collection. PDT encourages LAs to look at each debt in isolation and not to follow a set route for all recoveries.

Where a debtor is employed, Direct Earnings Attachments are a very effective method of instigating recovery and LAs need to make full use of this option. More innovative approaches are needed where debtors are self-employed or fail to respond to correspondence. PDT is available to help LAs react to these challenges.

We are looking at other options that might better support LAs in their HB debt recovery work, including providing employer information direct to LAs and how we might further incentivise recovery work.

The latest good practice on pursuing HB overpayment recovery effectively can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

If you would like to speak to a member of the PDT team please contact tony.withers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Reminder of secondment opportunity: DWP's 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 at 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.