



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 02 August 2017

Location: Caxton House Room 7.15

Attendees: DWP: Darren Baker (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Adrian Shooter, Chris Franks, Kay Bendell, Rob Bridgewater, Martin Little, Sarah Kissack, Gethin Hughes, Amanda Sowerby

Dial-in: Michael Mina, Amanda Frankland, Phil Eskdale-Lord, Paul Selby, Sylvia Seed

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

Dial-in: Helen Paine (Gateshead), Colin Graham (Dumfries), Lisa Fuller (Renfrewshire), Matthew Evans (Wrexham)

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)

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.

Action Points

The action points were cleared.

DWP advised the meeting of an issue which had come to light around funding for Real Time Information (RTI) Bulk Data Matching (RTI BDM). *Update: a note was issued on 09/08/17 to LAs advising them that funding for up to the end of August is confirmed but further funded details beyond this will be clarified later in August.*

2. Expanding the Remit for POG

DWP explained that with the formation of the LA Welfare Steering Group, (merging the Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group and the Universal Credit (UC) Local Authority (LA) Steering Group), the structure of governance would now flow between the UC Partnership Forum to the LA Welfare Steering Group and POG. As a consequence POG would need to expand its remit to include specific UC operational issues, as the three groups will feed into each other. The intention is that the LA Welfare Steering Group will be a strategic decision making body, while POG will retain its operational and practical role. It was agreed that the membership should remain unchanged.

POG members pointed out that the expansion of POG's remit should be reflected by lengthening the duration of meetings.

POG members added that for specific items, appropriate officers from DCLG should be invited to attend.

POG members asked about the membership of the Partnership Forum. DWP explained that the membership is being reviewed, with a view to refreshing it, and revising its remit.

Prototype Forward Look

DWP introduced a template, that when populated, will inform future agendas, and give LAs an oversight into what is on the stocks. POG members agreed that a document such as this would be helpful.

3. LA Change

DWP set out a potentially significant volume of change over the next 8 months, adding that these changes included legislative changes and LA efficiencies.

DWP asked POG whether this timetable of changes would be manageable for LAs.

POG members' view was that the list contained no real surprises, and should be manageable for LAs.

POG members asked about Emergency Temporary Accommodation, and in particular around the definitions, and whether Housing Departments at DCLG had been included in any discussions.

DWP explained that conversations are ongoing with UC and that DCLG will be involved.

4. Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI)

DWP gave the latest position on WURTI Alerts and their testing:

DWP set out:

- the background and purpose, including testing of the alerts service and subsequent evaluation
- the Fluctuating alert business rule and LA user needs and refinements
- the importance for LAs to be able to ingest income data into back office systems
- a current roadmap for rolling out Housing Benefit (HB) alerts from January to June 2018
- development and test activity from August to December 2017.

Regarding the WURTI product, DWP set out:

- the current position, strategy and next steps for the HB roll out
- the migration strategy, schedule and current position
- the implementation of HB alerts, including the deployment strategy, funding, and implementation.

DWP asked for POG's agreement for testing HB alerts, focusing on fluctuating alerts, across 5-6 LAs from late September. POG agreed for this testing to go ahead, suggesting using the existing test LAs along with some more volunteer LAs. They added that the consequential effects such as extra claimant contact should be factored into any Management Information (MI).

From general discussion it was agreed that automation is a critical success factor for LAs

POG members asked whether the intention for WURTI is for LAs to opt in, and whether the New Burdens assessments will be completed by December. DWP acknowledged that there are financial implications for LAs. The project is looking to understand the costs for LAs, and is in discussions with HM Treasury regarding funding.

5. Right Benefit Initiative (RBI)

DWP set out the current position on:

- the number of LAs opting into RBI and the total funding received
- Optional Real Time Information (RTI) files and their automation
- an example of a 4 week cycle
- LA performance.

DWP referred to an issue around unactioned referrals.

POG members questioned the mandatory status of Optional RTI. They referred to additional follow up work generated from these referrals.

DWP asked POG if they could submit any anecdotal evidence on:

- what would be considered reasonable in respect of daily volumes
- what factors are generating additional follow- up work.

6. Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Monitoring

In respect of DHP Monitoring returns, DWP set out:

- the background since April 2013 and previous consultation
- an update to proposals since the last POG meeting in March 2017
- the proposed monitoring return template.

From the discussion the following key points emerged:

- LAs will have different policies in respect of DHPs
- LAs will have different priorities for DHP awards
- definitions of awards could be an issue as one claim can end up as multiple awards as the DHP can cover a significant period of time
- the template will need further development with the number of applicants a priority as LAs will refuse an award more than once
- changes to LA software may be required
- further discussions with LA IT suppliers are needed in respect of definitions.

LA Insight Survey – Proposed Change to Approach

POG did not support the proposal to send the survey to Finance Directors (or equivalent). They suggested that an alternative approach to increasing the response rate would be to place a link in HB Direct.

7. Temporary Accommodation Management Fee

DWP introduced the item, covering the subsidy claim form and the re-issue of the guidance circular.

DWP explained the background to the policy intent following the announcement in November 2015 to remove payment through subsidy for the Temporary Accommodation Management Fee, and replace by a grant from

DCLG for English LAs and payment through the Barnett formula from the Devolved Administrations.

The discussion focused on implications for the subsidy claim form in respect of Qualifying Expenditure. POG members were of the view that this represented a change to the subsidy arrangement, and that the current guidance needed clarification.

DWP explained that guidance to clarify the position will be issued in the near future. POG members pointed out that some LAs have been informed that their subsidy claim could be Qualified.

DWP explained how expenditure regarding Management Fee can be reported on the subsidy claim form in Nil Subsidy cells.

POG members asked how the new rule interacts with the upper limit thresholds.

8. AOB

POG members referred to the Data Hub machine to machine transfer, asking for an update to be issued to LAs

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 27 September 2017 Caxton House Room Lower Ground 2.30. 10.30 – 14.00.

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