



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: DWP Local Authority Welfare Steering Group

Date: 05 July 2017

Location: Caxton House Room 5.21

Attendees: **DWP:** Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Darren Baker, Phil Eskdale–Lord, Annette Madden, Kay Bendell, Geoff Scammell, Sue Johnson

Scottish Government: Martyn Lindsay

Welsh Government: Linda Davis

DCLG: Mercy Adebisi, Andrew Keck

LAs: Rose Doran, Peter Meehan, Lisa Hayward, Alex Sewell, Andrew Stevens, Matthew Evans, Tim Savill, Lee Hemsworth, Adrian Mills, Susan Donald, Jennifer Wynter, Zena Cooke, Kirsty Johnson, Sarah Price, Debbie Wake

Apologies: Karina Stibbards, Graham Roberts, Simone Hines, Jayne Henderson

1. Welcome and Introductions:

DWP opened the meeting, welcoming members to the inaugural meeting. Introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in.

2. New Group: Remit

DWP explained that the formation of this group came about from a need to streamline the engagement process as issues around Housing Benefit (HB) and Universal Credit (UC) continue to overlap.

DWP emphasised the need to ensure that this group maintains a strategic view, along with a broader remit for the UC Partnership Forum and a broader operational scope for Practitioners' Operational Group (POG), to include operational aspects of UC.

The Steering Group referred to the Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group and its role in DWP's statutory obligation to consult with Local Authorities (LAs). DWP explained that the position in respect of the statutory obligation for it to consult was unchanged and the Terms of Reference will be amended to reflect this.

DWP pointed out the advantages of advance knowledge, particularly in the area of policy changes.

The meeting discussed the flow of information between this forum, POG and the UC Partnership Forum, It was agreed that minutes should flow between these forums, and that the Terms of Reference for all these groups will need to be linked to show the interactions.

The meeting discussed the expanded role of POG, and DWP confirmed that a discussion has taken place with the LA Chair.

The meeting also discussed the possibility of refreshing the membership of the UC Partnership Forum.

3. Terms of Reference

The meeting broadly agreed the membership as set out in in the Terms of Reference.

Ways of Working

The meeting looked at methods of working, and how this group fits, between POG and the UC Partnership Forum, and how it will feed into the UC Partnership Forum.

The commissioning by the Partnership Forum, from this forum of a paper on Homelessness for their September meeting is an example of how this group will feed into the UC Partnership Forum. With regard to working methods, the consensus was that agendas should reflect broad themes as opposed to a series of unrelated updates. DWP advised the group that a Forward Look document is under development and that this should inform future agendas.

With regard to standing agenda items, the meeting considered areas such as:

- an issues log (for exceptions only)
- finances
- joint papers
- forward look
- whether UC statistical information should be considered.

The Steering Group pointed out that there is no statutory obligation for DWP to consult on legislative changes to UC Housing costs; but where they impact on HB, it will be important for routine consultation to be channeled through this group.

4. Funding

LA Funding Project

DWP referred the meeting to previous discussions at the LAA Steering Group and with LA Chief Finance Directors. DWP also referred to a data gather, in conjunction with the Local Government Association (LGA), as well as the devolved administrations. The anticipated outcome from this will be a shared

understanding of the cost of delivering the HB/Local Council Tax Reduction Schemes (LCTRS) service; a refresh of the cost modelling work carried out in 2013. This acknowledges a need for a more current view, taking LA efficiencies into account and comparing LA workloads.

DWP added that the next steps will include a meeting with LGA, Welsh LGA and Convention Of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to look through early findings from the data and how this can be shared with this group to inform discussions. DWP also confirmed that LCTRS data will be included. The meeting discussed the need to look at the whole funding picture including Council Tax.

The Steering Group asked for a timeline for planning for all funding.

New Burdens

DWP referred the meeting to the cross Whitehall group meeting in August to look into compliance with the New Burdens Doctrine.

DWP also referred to its Housing Delivery Division's (HDD) ongoing work on a framework for New Burdens which will include:

- a fact sheet showing a step by step approach
- products which will be shared with DCLG
- an annex illustrating how costs for New Burdens are calculated.

Universal Support

DWP explained that Grant funding will be paid to those LAs that have signed up, and that data for the first quarter is being gathered, representing the first time that data has been gathered centrally.

DWP referred to New Burdens, and the Steering Group asked about Equality Impact Assessments and quantum for calculations.

Temporary Accommodation Management Fee

Steering Group members pointed out some of the issues around stripping out the Management Fee in some cases, and the consequent difficulties in giving evidence to Auditors. Steering Group members suggested that re-issuing a revision of Circular S5 2017 may be helpful, as the problem may be more widespread.

5. HB Fraud Error and Debt

DWP took the meeting through some of the key initiatives:

- Right Benefit Initiative (RBI)
- the continuing Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI) roll out and what it will provide.

DWP explained that that a process has begun to tie all of the initiatives together internally to create a strategic picture to bring to this group. The story would include future funding arrangements and will look at statistics.

DWP outlined some of the broad themes for future reference:

- forecasting caseloads in light of the UC roll out
- prioritisation
- how data will be structured, particularly in relation to debt stocks
- RBI beyond March 2018
- an evaluation of Payment Deduction Programme (PDP)
- data matching and interventions.

DWP referred to Spend to Save initiatives and how they can benefit delivery.

Steering Group members raised the following points:

- New burdens in respect of WURTI is still an issue
- there are concerns around the lack of Management Information (MI) for fraud
- there is a seeming lack of engagement with LAs from Fraud and Error Service (FES).

DWP explained that work is progressing on MI for fraud referrals.

Steering Group members asked about the implementation of the Engagement Action Plan and if it could be shared.

DWP explained that all of the Fraud and Error options will be wrapped up into one cohesive package to be published at around the end of the calendar year. Debt management will be included in the strategy, which will involve analysis of individual levels of debt to see where HB fits within the hierarchy of debt.

6. UC Engagement and Roll Out

DWP updated the meeting.

LA Engagement Events

- the last round of 3 events have taken place in London, Leeds and Newcastle
- the events were well attended and have generated positive feedback

- the agendas included lessons learned, best practice, LCTR and the Data Hub.

DWP advised the group that HDD has been commissioned to look into issues around data shared via the Hub. DWP informed the group that further engagement events are planned as the UC roll out scales up.

LCTR

DWP acknowledged the variations in LCTR schemes, and referred to a presentation to UC governance group where there was agreement to automate the LCTR process.

Temporary Accommodation

COSLA referred to the impact in Scotland on Temporary Accommodation. Steering Group members were of the view that the model for UC seemed incompatible with the monthly assessment process for UC.

The meeting discussed how Temporary Accommodation is defined, particularly around nightly paid accommodation.

From a policy perspective, DWP acknowledged that UC periodicity and Temporary Accommodation appears to be an issue.

Steering Group members pointed out that in some areas, particularly in London, the average stay in Temporary Accommodation can last approximately 4 years, as claimants move between different units and landlords. Nightly paid accommodation is often used in these cases. They reiterated their view that wider definitions are needed.

Steering Group members referred to UC Partnership Forum and suggested that they commission a piece of work on what is and is not in scope with UC.

7. AOB

No further items were brought forward for discussion.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LA Welfare Steering Group will take place on 05 September 2017 in Caxton House room 2.30 starting at 11.00.

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