



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: DWP Local Authority Welfare Steering Group

Date: 05 September 2017

Location: Caxton House Room 2.30

Attendees: **DWP:** Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Darren Baker, Chris Franks, Annette Madden, Kay Bendell, Sheena Parker, Geoff Scammell, Lewis Childs, Nick Browning, John Nelson, Raj Kang, Sandra Green, Graham Roberts

Dial in: Susan Johnston, Alan Brown, Jon Walton,

Welsh Government: Linda Davis

DCLG: Andrew Keck

LAs: Rose Doran, Simone Hines, Lisa Hayward, Sam Ashton, Matthew Evans, Tim Savill, Ian Brown, Adrian Mills, Susan Donald, Nicola Dickie, Mark Fowler, Jayne Henderson

Dial in: Peter Meehan, Sarah Price, Howard Mason, Helen Paine

Apologies: Karina Stibbards, Andrew Stevens, Zena Cooke, Lee Hemsworth, Jennifer Wynter, Frank McGregor

1. Welcome and Introductions:

DWP opened the meeting. Introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in.

2. Matters Arising

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed and the revised Terms of Reference were ratified by the group.

Action Points

The action points were cleared with the exception of the Supported Accommodation consultation, which remains open.

With regard to definitions of Emergency Temporary Accommodation, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) suggested that the timetable for the changes to the regulations will be dependent on securing agreement from Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), which will be challenging.

3. HB Fraud Error and Debt

Review of Housing Benefit (HB) Fraud Referral Process

DWP set out:

- the background to the review
- the evidence based review with 8 volunteer Local Authorities (LAs), including a review of the Fraud and Error Service (FES) Central Referral Service (CRS); a new process
- findings and conclusions from the review
- next steps, including a report which will be shared with the group.

DWP added that while the review had highlighted significant improvement in the process, there remains much to do to improve local engagement in some areas of the country, as well as more investigation into the adequacy of New Burdens Funding.

DWP referred to data gathering in respect of New Burdens to inform future business cases.

Steering Group members suggested that raising the 10 megabyte limit, particularly in light of the need for multiple emails could reduce the burden when needing to send large files across. DWP pointed out that local engagement is key. DWP is looking into increasing the 10 megabyte limit, and also looking into widening the use of the Data Hub. Steering Group members pointed out that there is an issue with CRS deleting data after 30 days.

Joint Working: DWP and LA Fraud Investigations

DWP set out:

- an explanation of what joint working is and how it works
- findings to date
- potential savings
- impact on LAs and next steps.

Steering members noted that LA concerns previously raised had been acknowledged. They also asked whether there was scope to investigate housing tenancy fraud.

DWP went on to say that a letter will be issued to all LAs seeking volunteers, and that more information will be placed on the Knowledge Hub, along with a short questionnaire.

The Steering Group asked whether there were issues with smaller districts sharing resources. DWP explained that shared anti fraud services could form a model.

3 Year HB Fraud Error and Debt (FED) Strategy

DWP updated the meeting on the 3 year strategy, highlighting that:

- the strategy is aimed at impacting net Monetary Value of Fraud and Error (MVFE) and includes a package of initiatives
- the focus is on earnings and the use of Real Time Information (RTI)
- MI for the first 3 months of RBI is undergoing analysis
- Wider Use of RTI (WURTI) continues to roll out and issues around fluctuating earnings are being discussed at Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)
- further testing of WURTI Alerts is planned this month
- the Performance Development Team (PDT) is continuing to disseminate Good Practice.

DWP added that in respect of Debt, work is ongoing with the Payment Deduction Programme, (PDP) and the future solution for off - benefit recovery.

In discussion, the following key points emerged:

- RTI is creating overpayments which LAs cannot recover as claimants move to Universal Credit, (UC)
- the hierarchy of debt is still a perceived issue
- a reconciliation of all debt, to be carried out by PDP would be helpful
- Council Tax debt is a concern.

DWP acknowledged the Group's concerns around debt and agreed to put debt on the agenda for the next meeting.

DWP explained that debt needs to be looked at in the round, with a work plan with milestones and timescales for each issue. It was suggested that from in depth discussion at the next meeting, a paper should be produced for further discussion at the next Partnership Forum meeting.

From the UC perspective, debt has been discussed at the Partnership Forum in relation to evidence gathering.

DWP added that the commitment given to POG in respect of RTI Bulk Data Matching funding will be communicated shortly.

4. Paper on Partnership Working on Housing Costs and Homelessness

The Local Government Association (LGA) representative explained the purpose and intent of the paper, commissioned by the DWP LA Partnership Forum, for discussion at their meeting on 14 September.

The paper contained tangible pieces of work reflecting discussions with LA Chief Finance Officers, and that the challenge is to focus on what can be

worked on. Housing costs are the headline issues for LAs, and key issues identified through this group included:

- the long term role for LAs in respect of HB and welfare services
- how best to provide effective support to the most vulnerable claimants, building on the Universal Support initiative.

Steering Group members agreed that this represented a workable approach, and a test for a new way of working.

Steering Group members agreed that the key issue was around the future roles for central and local government, and issues such as Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) will fall out of this.

The group also referenced the UC roll out from live to full service, with regard to maintaining shared local arrangements that are in place for live service into full service.

COSLA suggested that the future of the pensioner caseload could be a strand of work. Additionally it was felt that Debt recovery could be another strand of work.

5. Universal Credit

LA Engagement

DWP updated the meeting:

- scalability is on track for October
- the next round of the UC-LA Quarterly Engagement will commence mid-September (21/09 – Rugby, 25/09 – Hammersmith and 26/09 - Newcastle)
- feedback has been requested from the previous sessions. All Quarter 1 Universal Support Grant payments have been made to those who signed up and Quarter 2 payments will be made at the end of September
- Universal Support Management Information returns from Quarter 1 have been processed and regional reports are being finalised.

Steering Group members asked about the communications for the HB Stop Notice. DWP explained that a note will be placed on Glass Cubes with an item in HB Direct in October to follow.

Steering Group members also asked about the UC LA full service Support pack which they understood is being revised into an interactive format, and which they would like sight of as soon as possible.

DWP updated the group to say that the new full service pack will be ready in the next few weeks and made available to be shared with LAs at that time. In the meantime the current pack is still available.

Housing Costs Improvements

DWP updated the meeting on progress so far, and having looked at the information provided some key issues have been identified:

- requests for information from landlords needs to occur earlier in the process, particularly in respect of rent verification
- data mismatches have been identified.

DWP added that further issues are being worked through, and process mapping has begun.

Landlord Portal

DWP gave a real time demonstration of the Landlord Portal, showing the journey from a reported change in circumstance and the information provided by the claimant through to what the landlord will see. Screens included Managed Payments to Landlord and rent verification

DWP added that the Portal is currently undergoing an extended test phase, and communications have been tested with the Social Landlord Group. Final communications on Roll out are subject to Ministerial approval and LAs will be updated once this process has completed.

6. Forward Look

DWP introduced the Forward Look document, explaining the underlying concept in that it will show what is on the work plan, inform future agendas for the Steering Group and POG, and give LAs an oversight into what is on the stocks.

Steering Group members were broadly supportive of the document, suggesting that traffic light indicators against certain items could be helpful. They also referred to UC communications, for example the introduction of UC circulars. DWP explained that currently, this type of information is covered in the UC L&D Packs for LAs. It was suggested that tangible items such as the Landlord Portal could be included in the Forward Look.

DWP spoke about the need to make sure information on issues and updates that the LAs have raised including developments on UC needs to be fed back to LAs in a timely manner. The UC Programme are considering developing a UC Circular, with a similar look and feel to the HB Circulars,

this may not be the long term solution while other interactive options are explored but it will meet a current need.

7. AOB

Steering Group members asked about HB redundancy costs.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LA Welfare Steering Group will take place on 18 October 2017 in Caxton House room 5.21 starting at 11.00.

Contact: Mont Goldman

Email: Mont.goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk