

Migrants Access to Benefits - feedback and best practices

Background

1. Following the introduction of access to Housing Benefit for European Economic Area (EEA) Jobseeker, the Migrants Access to Benefits (MABS) project undertook an exercise to understand how well the measure had embedded in the local authorities (LAs). In particular checking that supporting products developed had been received and utilised ensuring staff felt sufficiently up skilled to deal with the changes in the legislation.
2. The agreed communication channel was via the Work Service Division Partnership Managers who have on-going links with LAs nationwide. They were tasked with obtaining feedback via an agreed question set. The following information extracted from the feedback received highlights the key factors/areas from this exercise. Best practices and ongoing work to improve/strengthen existing process should be acknowledged and will be shared across all business areas.
3. It is recognised that there was a high level of responses received for this exercise which supports the excellent continued work between the DWP and LAs. The project would like to thank all parties for their contributions.

Findings

4. The return from the exercise was positive with 132 LAs nationwide providing feedback. The feedback included examples of good practice and areas for improvement. Below is a snapshot of the key findings and best practices:

Training

- A number of LAs chose to run additional training sessions incorporating the circular to ensure staff understanding of this proved beneficial and enabled consistent messages to be cascaded and understood
- Others made a decision to upskill small teams of experienced managers and senior managers to deal specifically with EEA caseload for their authority again encouraging accuracy and consistency
- A small percentage of sites decided to produce further desk aids, flow charts and examples to strengthen knowledge within their site
- Where numbers of EEA cases received were low it was recognised that staff had to regularly refer back to the circular to build knowledge on action to take.

All of the above practices were dependant on the size of LA and the volume of cases received

Notifications

- Majority of the sites have confirmed that they are receiving secure emails as expected from their linked Benefit Centres
- Some sites suggested the numbers received are low – it is important that sites use existing communication channels between linked benefit centres and LAs if they have concerns about numbers received.

Communication Channels

- Majority of LAs recognised that having established communications links between DWP and LAs with good working relationships proved beneficial and assisted the introduction of the change
- Links between existing benefit centres and LAs varied with both positive and negative results received. It is recommended that both parties should continue to ensure that they have adequate liaison contacts with regular use to ensure these relations are kept up to date particularly when movement of work is made across both businesses.

On-going

- One of the main concerns for the majority of LAs was around Customer Information System (CIS) notes not being accurately recorded in line with the guidance provided. We have worked closely with the Benefit Directorate to resolve and improve this issue. We have highlighted your concerns through existing engagement channels and have agreed specific wording of guidance to be used in the notes. This has been communicated to operational staff and managers, improvements are apparent. Additionally talkback meetings have taken place to further address this compliance issue and the difficulties this creates for LA staff.
- A small number of sites have stated they have not had any EEA customers to date that have fallen into the new criteria therefore have not had chance to experience the change. This is not a cause for concern as these sites are small in size and not in high migrant areas.
- There are some sites stating they have not received emails to date but would like a test to be carried out to ensure this is correct. The project recommends these sites communicate with their linked benefit centres to establish a test of the LA email address being utilised for this purpose.
- There was a suggestion that more claimant information should be available on GOV.UK. We will review the information available on the web pages to ensure that there is sufficient guidance and information.

Additional comments

- The timing of the circular was commented upon as it was issued close to go-live and the LAs didn't feel enough time was available to digest the important information as effectively as managers would have liked. The project is aware that the timing could have been improved however the timescales associated with this change were very tight and ministerial driven therefore unavoidable on this occasion.