



Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 29 November 2017

Location: Caxton House Room 5.21

Attendees: DWP: Kay Bendell (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Adrian Shooter, Kath Murphy, Amanda Sowerby, Paul Selby (All HDD), James Ablewhite, Mary Barry, (Fraud Error/Debt), Martin Little, Rob Bridgewater (WURTI Project),

Dial-in: Sheena Parker, Jason Perrott, Beverley Winnemore (All HDD), Adrian Landeg (Fraud Error/Debt)

LAAs: Paul Ellary (RB Kensington & Chelsea), Sara Spark (EK Services), Gwynn Thomas (Westminster), June Deans (Glasgow), David Kinnair (Birmingham), Chris Boylett (LB Newham),

Dial-in: Adrian Mills (Anglia Revenues), Matthew Evans (Wrexham), Pam Richardson (Gateshead)

Apologies: Darren Baker (HDD), Les Robertson (Fife), Colin Wallbank (Welsh LGA), Andrew Hyatt (RB Kensington & Chelsea), Charles Taylor (East Renfrewshire), Iain Marshalsay (Ceredigion), Colin Graham (Dumfries)

1. Welcome and Introductions:

DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialling in.

2. Matters Arising

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

The action points were cleared.

3. Consultation on 2018/19 Digital/Technological Spending

DWP confirmed that Housing Delivery Division (HDD) has secured some additional funding to spend on discretionary projects. DWP outlined projects which have been allocated specific money and early thinking around ideas for projects coming from internal HDD consultation.

DWP asked POG for their views on whether the assumptions were correct and whether anything of potential significance had been omitted. POG members were appreciative that their views are being canvassed, and asked for more time to reach consensus.

DWP referred to the post Budget changes which could impact on HDD's capacity.

POG members agreed to submit their views on the proposals by 08 December

4. Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) Alerts

DWP referred to the POG January 2017 meeting which raised issues such as:

- design of rules
- integration and automation
- funding.

DWP then set out :

- the key VEP priorities including:
 - the roll out of VEP User Interface to all Local Authorities (LAs):- this is almost complete and includes averaging calculation functionality
 - delivery of a scaleable alerts service to all LAs
 - exploiting opportunities for automation through integration with LA IT systems, for which work is ongoing with LA IT suppliers.
- VEP alert types:
 - one for the start date for earnings and non-state pension
 - another for fluctuating earnings for which the project is looking to refine the rule
 - the aim for these alerts is to filter out low level referrals, only generating referrals which will lead to changes.
- proposals for Alerts distribution
- key operating model principles for the Alerts service:
 - to minimise the amount of Management Information (MI) to be recorded
 - through use of the interface, LA users will be able to pull their own alerts to meet their assigned capacity which will minimise work in progress.
- an illustration of proposed MI for benefits managers
- integration with LA systems and next steps
- funding options.

The following points were discussed:

- extending the test phase to further test the business rule
- the alerts distribution proposals could:
 - add complexity to LA work management systems
 - potentially create issues around deployment of staff due to peaks and troughs.
- POG expressed a preference for MI from 2 sources.

With regard to funding it was agreed that it will need to be clear and transparent, and finalised as soon as possible. Other key points to emerge were:

- the costs to LAs should include impacts on Council Tax Reduction (CTR)
- the need to work together on the funding model to end up with a fair settlement
- to recognise that a solution without automation will result in a longer end to end process
- whether use of the alerts will be mandatory.

5. Audit of Subsidy Letter

DWP has written to Section 151 Officers and Revenues and Benefits Managers on 07 November 2017. The letter concerned Housing Benefit (HB) Subsidy Assurance and extended the deadline set out in Circular S1 2017 for LAs to inform DWP of their audit arrangements. The deadline will be confirmed by the end of January 2018.

POG queried the number of Qualified Accounts, referring to the small amounts which can create discrepancies leading to accounts being qualified. They referred to previous discussions where the principle of a de-minimus had been raised. DWP explained the principle of zero materiality, also referring to ongoing work being carried out in respect of garnering and disseminating Good Practice.

It was suggested that a small working group should be set up to look at a review of HB Subsidy Assurance and audit arrangements for 2019/20.

6. Recovery Rates for Attachment to Earnings

POG members had expressed concern that the high rates for Direct Attachment to Earnings were causing hardship. DWP explained that Attachment to Earnings need not be regarded as the default position and should be seen as a last resort. DWP advised that the rate to be deducted by the employer can be altered. POG asked to see the guidance.

7. Post Budget Update

Fraud and Error funding

DWP explained that funding has been secured for next year to be used for VEP Alerts.

POG had a number of questions in relation recent correspondence issued by Universal Credit (UC).

Temporary Accommodation

- 1) Subsidy arrangements around the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates need clarification, particularly the timescales involved.
 - 2) Whether Jobcentres will be advised not to sign up those claimants in Temporary Accommodation to UC. DWP advised that claimants in Temporary Accommodation are excluded from UC Live Service as a gateway restriction, and that for Full Service, regulations will need to be amended.
 - 3) Calculations in respect of shifting caseloads will need to be revised.
- HB Run On (re-named Transition to UC Housing Payment).

The discussion focused on what needs to be done to move this forward and how POG can input into the process. DWP explained that it has started to impact the Transition to UC Housing Payment, and that it will engage with the LA IT Suppliers. DWP added that for an initial period (approximately 6 months) a clerical workaround will be required. POG pointed out the potential impact on CTR.

Closure of Live Service

DWP confirmed that the working assumption is that new claims to UC in Live Service areas will cease from 01 January 2018. HDD is working closely with UC colleagues on how best to communicate the change to LAs. POG felt that an A Circular giving as much detail as possible would be appropriate.

POG also raised a point around the Transition to UC Housing Payment, concerning changes of address from a Live to a Full Service area. DWP confirmed that in such cases the Live Service area will be responsible for the payment.

POG also queried software automation, as in some cases, the suppliers have billed LAs for automated stop notices.

8. AOB

Several items of AOB were brought forward:

- 1) Customer Management System: POG reported that not all claims are being received. An incident has been raised on Glass Cubes.
- 2) HB Review: POG referred to the Pension caseload and an issue around underpayments where LAs uprate at the higher rate. This is being flagged as an error from the date of evidence. POG asked whether this was a trend as it inflates the error rate. Case Management Information: Amanda Sowerby informed POG that experimental statistics are being reviewed by the analysts. The analysts are looking for volunteer LAs to test the new methodology. POG suggested publishing an article in HB Direct could be a way forward.
- 3) POG agreed to send in their comments on the Benefits Resilience proposals by 01 December.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of POG will take place on 25 January 2018 Caxton House Room 2.30 10.30 – 14.00.

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