Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 25 January 2018

Location: **Caxton House Room 5.21**

Attendees: DWP: Darren Baker (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Kay Bendell, Amanda Sowerby, Sheena Parker, Alan Sullivan (All HDD), Andrew Hibble (WURTI Project), Chris Franks (UC)
Dial-in: Paul Selby, (HDD), Adrian Landeg, Tudor Jones, (Fraud Error/Debt), Alexa Spurgeon
Ministry for Housing Communities & Local Government (MHCLG): Darrell Smith, Alan Millward, Elly Locke
LAAs: Paul Ellary (RB Kensington & Chelsea), Gwynn Thomas (Westminster), June Deans (Glasgow), David Kinnair (Birmingham), Chris Boylett (LB Newham), Adrian Mills (Anglia Revenues), Mandy Fathers (West Oxford), Mark Gillmore (EK Services)
Dial-in: Matthew Evans (Wrexham), Pam Richardson (Gateshead)

Apologies: 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, and action points were cleared.

3.   **Feedback from the LA Welfare Steering Group**

   DWP summarised the recent Steering Group meeting, explaining that the focus had been on funding, split into four key areas:

   - Housing Benefit (HB) Admin Subsidy
   - Universal Credit (UC) New Burdens and Universal Support funding
   - Discretionary Housing Payments: Government contribution

- New Burdens.

The meeting was also given an update on the Budget measure changes.

DWP shared the New Burdens for 2018/19. There was concern around the sufficiency of the amount set aside for the Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS). DWP explained to the Steering Group that it is working with 30 – 40 local authorities (LAs) gathering evidence to enable it to review the amount of funding for SFIS and that work is ongoing to resolve problems caused by the 10 Megabyte limit for LAs.

DWP explained that the intention is to issue the LA Funding Schedule showing the actual amounts as soon as possible. The Funding Schedule should include the DHP allocations, subject to clearance.

With regard to New Burdens for the closure of UC Live Service, mixed economy LAs, (those LAs dealing with Live and Full Service) will be taken into account.

DWP explained that updates had been given on:

- the funding for Universal Support
- new Burdens
- the legal advice in respect of the criteria for HB redundancies.

POG members asked whether failed and multiple appointments in respect of Universal Support had been taken into account. DWP explained that issues around appointments will be explored in a forthcoming "Deep Dive" session.

The Steering Group was given sight of draft Terms of Reference for the Local Authority Funding Group which will be a separate consultation group looking at appropriate levels of detail in respect of LA funding.

POG members referred to DHPs and in particular the need for LAs to see data in respect of benefit capped claimants in receipt of UC. POG members queried whether there was a case to revisit the data shared with LAs by UC, particularly as Temporary Accommodation has been taken back into HB.

4. **Budget Changes**

DWP updated the meeting on changes to Temporary Accommodation and Transition to UC Housing Payment:

- the regulations were laid on 22 January 2018 and will come into force on 11 April 2018

- with regard to the Transition to UC Housing Payment, there are no plans to change the date on the HB Stop Notice. For changes of address, the Stop Notice will include the new address
- funding has been allocated for New Burdens for the Transition to UC Housing Payment, and discussions with the Software Suppliers around any possible changes to software are planned.

POG members pointed out that as the Transition to UC Housing Payment is treated as passported, potentially, LAs will need system changes to override the current process.

POG members asked for any guidance to be issued as soon as possible.

POG raised an issue concerning conflicting advice given to LAs in respect of changes of address within the same LA, resulting in claimants moving from UC Live Service to UC Full Service. They pointed out that this is significant given that Temporary Accommodation will be taken back into HB.
DWP acknowledged the need for clear communications, and agreed to feed back POG's concerns to Policy colleagues, adding that some worked scenarios would be helpful.

POG pointed out the need to communicate the changes in rent to customers and then to LA Members in March.

DWP updated the meeting on developments in UC, advising that Waiting Days will be removed from 14 February 2018.

DWP introduced the UC Issues Resolution Log which shows the current issues and how they are being resolved. DWP asked POG for their views on what should be included.

5.   HB Earnings Related Fraud and Error Funding 2018/19

DWP set out:

- the 2018/19 funding for LAs; the funding is set for 5 years, but the allocation will subject to variance
- the proposed roll out approach for Verify Earnings and Pension (VEP) Alerts
- proposals for a funding model for Real Time Information (RTI) referrals and VEP Alerts; there will be no productivity targets
- methodologies for apportioning funding
- launch requirements
- an example of how funding could be split
- next steps.

From the discussion, POG pointed out that:

- for any guidance produced, the position around using alerts for Local Council Tax Support, LCTS), will need clarification
- with regard to the VEP roll out, the definition of what is a 'Stable Income Case' will be required.

With regard to the proposals for a funding model, POG members explained that in order to make an informed decision, LAs will need comprehensive information as soon as possible, and that the guidance must include DWP expectations of LAs.

POG members also referred to the deployment of LA resources, and discussion focused on how LAs can be engaged to opt into VEP

6. **Supported Accommodation Consultation**

MHCLG updated the meeting.

- the policy will affect England only
- the consultation ended on 23 January 2018
- MHCLG is looking at 3 new models:
    i)   Sheltered Accommodation.
    ii)   Long term supported accommodation, administered through the welfare benefits system.
    iii)   Short term supported accommodation; individuals living in these schemes won't be charged any HB or UC eligible housing costs, the costs will be covered in full by the LA from a ring fenced grant fund.
- MHCLG is looking to work with LA HB Revenues and Benefits teams to establish the correct funding level, this would take the form of a data collection exercise for current volumes and expenditure in HB for supported housing
- a new IT marker for Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) will be required. The marker will be set by HB Revenues and Benefits teams.

DWP asked whether a sampling exercise could be appropriate. MHCLG colleagues explained that this had been discounted because of the range of arrangements across the country. MHCLG need to establish as full a picture as possible of what short term supported accommodation is available across England.   POG members asked whether the data required was qualitive or quantitive, gathered from SHBE.

POG members emphasised the importance of clear definitions when gauging the impact on HB spend. They added that LAs do not have the software to

support breakdowns of rent and eligible service charges. MHCLG acknowledged that additional costs could be incurred.

7. **Fraud and Error Service (FES) Management Information (MI)**

DWP updated the meeting on progress since the September POG meeting:

- MI has now been successfully tested with 13 LAs
- the MI is undergoing enhanced Quality Assurance
- quarter 1 data for 2017/18 (April – June 2017) will be issued to LAs at the end of January 2018 along with a letter introducing it
- data for Quarters 2 and 3 (July – December) will be issued to LAs at around the end of February 2018.

Pension Credit Uprating

POG members asked whether there had been any progress towards automation. DWP explained that a solution is being sought.
DWP acknowledged that this is an ongoing issue for LAs.

8. **Debt Service Project**

DWP setout the:

- the project and project team
- the background
- the VEP tool
- data variables, LAs and HMRC
- the interim solution for the data transfer mechanism
- communications and milestones.

DWP explained that the solution at present is short term, and that the project team is pursuing a longer term technical solution. 2 tests have been conducted, mainly around debt raised from 2013/14; both tests have been successful.

DWP gave the meeting a demonstration showing some case studies to illustrate what the data will look like.

POG members reiterated the point made at the November meeting, concerning whether there could be any variance on the percentage deduction for Detachment to Earnings.

9.   AOB

The following items of AOB were brought forward:

Rebuttal statements: DWP gave the background to the issue, explaining that this had been raised by the Crown Prosecution Service. The issue concerns evidence obtained by the witness, (LA member of staff), whereby a statement will be required from the LA. In a small number of cases a rebuttal statement will be required and in a small number of instances, an appearance at court will be required. POG members pointed out that this will create additional new burdens for LAs, as training will be necessary, given that experienced LA fraud staff have transferred to SFIS. They added that the Service Level Agreement (SLA) will need revision.

DWP acknowledged the need to work with LAs to support and protect staff. DWP pointed out that potential new burdens around this issue will be included in analysis of the risk around funding for SFIS.
DWP agreed that the SLA can be revisited in light of a new requirement for witness statements.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of POG will take place on 21 March 2018 Caxton House Room 2.30 10.30 – 14.00.

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