



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: DWP Local Authority (LA) Welfare Steering Group

Date: 25 April 2018

Attendees: DWP: Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Darren Baker, Kay Bendell, Chris Franks, Annette Madden, Graham Roberts, Karen Maskill

Dial in: Amanda Frankland, Johnnie Harris, Raj Kang, Steve Frakes

Welsh Government: Linda Davis

Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG): Kelly Verney, Kathy Bee (Dial in)

LAs: Lisa Hayward, Sam Ashton, Michael McClements, Adrian Mills, June Deans, Sheila Haig, Matthew Evans, Tim Savill, Andy Cameron

Dial in: Ian Brown, Peter Meehan, Howard Mason, Helen Payne, Simone Hines

Apologies: Andrew Stevens, Jennifer Wynter, Rose Doran, Susan Donald, Zena Cooke, Sarah Price, Jayne Henderson

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.

There was an omission from the previous minutes in respect of the discussion on the MHCLG Feasibility study – Causes of Homelessness. This has now been corrected.

Action Points

The action points were cleared.

DWP referred to Action Point March 02 in respect of concerns on the changes to Temporary Accommodation, saying that this will be addressed at the May meeting of Practitioners' Operational Group (POG).

Previous POG meeting

DWP highlighted the key points of discussion from the March POG meeting. An issue was raised around Single Fraud Investigations (SFI) Management Information (MI), and new burdens. It was agreed that these issues will be discussed at the forthcoming meeting of POG.

3. Universal Support Update

DWP updated the meeting on the current position in respect of Universal Support.

Quarterly information had shown that 25% of LAs had submitted nil returns and in order to address this:

- internal meetings have taken place looking at the customer journey and whether more guidance is required, with more planned
- a series of 'Go Look See' visits have been carried out at 14 sites, (9 Full Service and 5 Live Service), including focus groups with claimants
- the outcomes from these visits are being analysed and the results should be available at the end of April / early May 2018
- early indications have shown inconsistencies in the process for feedback.

DWP went on to explain that In order to improve the feedback process, particularly between Work Coaches and LAs, the knowledge base of the Work Coaches will need building up, adding that there is a need for structured discussions between LAs, Jobcentres and Service Centres to improve take up.

DWP pointed out that co-location is working well, and should be encouraged.

The Steering Group referred to the proactive work being done by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). DWP advised that a Round Table event with stakeholders including Citizens Advice Bureaus (CABs) and RSLs will take place on 04 May 2018. One of the areas that the Round Table will look into will be failure to attend interviews.

In further discussion, the following points were considered:

- work needs to be done around recording Universal Support outcomes onto the system
- more can be done to publicise Universal Support and to get a better understanding of the reasons behind the lower levels of take up.

DWP went on to say that following a suggestion offered at the previous Steering Group meeting, the team visited Suffolk, and there are plans to visit Edinburgh in May.

The Steering Group pointed out that shortening the deadline for MI returns is causing an issue for some LAs, particularly as this is a manual process. They asked whether this deadline can be revisited, and whether the process could be simplified.

The Steering Group raised an issue around co-location working, and in particular IT issues around internet connections for LA staff working in Jobcentres.

The Steering Group reiterated their suggestion that input from DWP Behavioral Insight Specialists could prove advantageous.

4. LA Funding Group Update

DWP updated the meeting:

- the group held its inaugural meeting on 29 March 2018 the remit for group is to give space for expanded discussion on finances, for example, the tension between workloads and caseloads
- the Group will also be looking at refreshing the cost model and will be considering cost models from different LAs
- the Group will work to support the assurance of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), and will take part in a teleconference with volunteer LAs.

DWP explained that the planning process for 2019/20 is underway, and that the evidence gather to support Administration Subsidy will be crucial, as there will be significant financial pressures.

The Steering Group referred to reductions in the overall amount allocated by HM Treasury, and DWP outlined the potential challenges.

The Steering Group referred to the potential negative impact of the funding gap on the quality of LA services. They added that there could be a case for joint case funding as the workload is not diminishing.

DWP explained that there is a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) hearing on 01 May 2018 and that Housing Delivery Division (HDD) is aware of the risks and will be actively looking to find ways to reduce administrative costs and support the generation of income e.g. by reducing nugatory alerts.

5. Universal Credit (UC) Issues Log

DWP highlighted and updated the key issues in the log:

Data Sharing:

- the LA Data Sharing team has escalated the connectivity issue, which has affected Local Council Tax Reduction (LCTR) in the main.

The Steering Group pointed out issues around duplication and non availability of files which is causing delays.

The Steering Group asked whether form MGP1 needs to be sent back at all in light of the Transition to UC Housing Payments.

Debt Recovery:

- the Debt Recovery scenarios were taken to POG but not discussed in any detail
- they will be developed in conjunction with other areas of Fraud Error and Debt, to form part of a wider communication product with LAs.

Consent:

- Discovery work is ongoing.

Steering Group felt that this will be an issue impacting on Managed Migration. DWP explained that examples of standard advice will be shared with Steering Group members.

Corporate Appointees:

- the process for corporate appointees is being redesigned for UC Full Service.

The Steering Group pointed out that some LAs have recently experienced issues with appointees.

Passported Benefits:

- representatives from the Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Government explained the position in Wales in respect of Free School Meals.

The Steering Group asked for the following issues to be added to the log:

1. Issues around automation in respect of the Transition to UC Housing Payment.
2. Managed Payments to Landlords.
3. Issues around the new style Employment Support Allowance (ESA).

6. LA Feedback on the Budget Welfare Changes – Temporary Accommodation and Transition to UC Housing Payment

DWP introduced the topic, explaining that in order to develop a picture of how implementation of the two key budget welfare changes is progressing, Steering Group members were asked to provide feedback.

DWP acknowledged that the timeline between the announcement and implementation had not been optimum. Internal in-depth focused meetings are planned to examine the end to end process for communications, internal governance and new burdens.

DWP highlighted some of the key areas from the feedback:

- concerns around the Learning and Development pack
- issues around signposting, particularly in respect of the changes to Temporary Accommodation
- funding: (discussed at POG), new burdens and units costs, and how unit cost timings match up against the clerical process
- issues around software, particularly Housing Benefit (HB) integration with LCTR
- issues around DHP underspend against allocation, particularly in respect of the changes to Temporary Accommodation, and how this can be evidenced.

Steering Group members pointed out that the issue around DHPs is not exclusive to Temporary Accommodation. DWP explained that the issue would be relevant for the review into DHPs. DWP added that relevant information and evidence from the Steering Group would be helpful.

DWP Housing Policy Division (HPD) explained that it will be looking at DHPs going forward, particularly around the monitoring exercise, and will be taking this forward through POG, and that any information from Steering Group would be vital.

Transition to UC Housing Payment

Steering Group members were concerned about the timeline for automation of the process, and referred to information received from software suppliers concerning their workloads and priorities. They pointed out that the time taken to carry out the clerical process was at odds with the timings for the whole unit cost on which the amount for new burdens was based. DWP explained that the new burdens funding was based on the clerical process for the whole year.

Steering Group members felt that information regarding the workloads and priorities for software suppliers should feed into wider discussions around funding.

The Steering Group requested that any standard wording for advice to claimants be shown to POG before it is issued.

Temporary Accommodation

The Steering Group referred to instances where changes of circumstances had resulted in the entire claim to UC being closed down; this had occurred with different LAs using the same Service Centre.

They added that there are issues around data sharing.

7. AOB

DWP Baker advised the meeting that:

- a working group has been set up, with a remit to reduce Fraud and Error, particularly in UC, ESA, HB and Tax Credits prior to Managed Migration. Trials will commence in June 2018, and the Steering Group will be advised of further details in writing
- LAs are being advised in writing of their Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) funding with notifications issued on 25 April.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LA Welfare Steering Group is scheduled to take place 12 June 2018. LGA Beecham Room, 18 Smith Square, Westminster, London SW1P 3HZ.

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