



## Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: **Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)**

Date: **21 March 2018**

Location: **Caxton House Room 5.21**

**Attendees:** **DWP:** Darren Baker (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Kay Bendell, Sheena Parker, Alan Sullivan, Alan Brown (All HDD), Adrian Landeg (FED), Karen Michael, Simon Foot (UC), Mark Griffiths, Simon Lunn (Strategy Working Age), Sharon Young (Debt Management), Rob Terry (OED Design)

**Dial-in:** Richard Ward (Strategy Working Age), Jane Millbank, Julie Mclean (DWP Scottish Devolution Programme), Catherine Flynn (Strategy Working Age)

**Observers:** Simon Smith (HDD), Emily Ryans (Senior Stakeholder Manager)

**Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG):** Darrell Smith, Alan Millward

**LAAs:** Paul Ellary (RB Kensington & Chelsea), Gwynn Thomas (Westminster), June Deans (Glasgow), David Kinnair (Birmingham), Chris Boylett (LB Newham), Mandy Fathers (West Oxford), Mark Gillmore (EK Services)

**Dial-in:** Matthew Evans (Wrexham), Pam Richardson (Gateshead), Lisa Fuller (Renfrewshire), Paula Doherty (Dumfries & Galloway)

**Apologies:** Adrian Mills (Anglia Revenues), 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 Baker opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialing in.

### **2. Matters Arising:**

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

The action points were cleared.

With regard to the Verify Earnings and Pensions roll out, POG noted concern around the lack of testing.

Feedback from the Local Authority (LA) Welfare Steering Group (07 March 2018)

DWP summarised the recent LA Welfare Steering Group, thanking the POG member who had updated the meeting on the January POG meeting.

The key areas discussed at the LA Welfare Steering Group were:

- Universal Credit (UC) Issues Log
- passported benefits and Temporary Accommodation
- the LA Funding Group, and where it will be positioned with the LA Welfare Steering Group and POG
- Universal Support; Management Information (MI), acceptances and future strategic direction
- Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Feasibility Study – Causes of Homelessness
- general budget update, including the use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to compensate for gaps in the Assessment Period.

With regard to DHPs, POG members agreed to provide evidence to support their views on LA spend, and in particular that of London councils. DWP suggested that this topic could be appropriate for the LA Funding Group, and could feed into the overall review of DHPs.

On a related issue, POG raised some concerns with regulations for the transition to UC, and in particular around the first Assessment Period where there are no housing costs and consequently awards of DHPs are not applicable.

#### POG Agendas

DWP asked whether it would be helpful to set up agenda setting telekits 2 weeks prior to each meeting. POG pointed out the need for all members to contribute. It was agreed to hold a brief pre-meeting prior to each future meeting.

#### Circular A2/ 2018

DWP acknowledged the points raised by POG in respect of their input. DWP proposed a revised process for Quality Review (QR) which would mean greater transparency.

POG agreed that this would be helpful, and would enhance their role in examining the detail impacting on LAs. They added that worked examples would have been helpful in this case.

DWP also referred to the need for a review of UC and Housing Benefit (HB) communications products in terms of sequencing, most appropriate medium and the QR process.

It was agreed that the Learning and Development Pack should be issued as

### **3. DWP MHCLG Supported Housing Policy**

Attendees from MHCLG introduced this item.

It was agreed that the DWP draft circular to Revenue and Benefit teams on identifying short-term specified accommodation (supported housing) related cases when assessing new claims for Housing Benefit or changes of circumstances, and associating this with the new IT marker, could now be issued as soon as possible.

It was agreed that a separate follow-up telekit should be arranged “off-line” with POG members to discuss the feasibility, most effective approach, and potential administrative activities involved, of undertaking a one-off review of the live stock Housing Benefit caseload, in order to identify existing spend on short-term specified accommodation that would not be captured by the new IT marker applying to new claims.

*(Note: this telekit subsequently took place on 27 March 2018, and following on from that a short options template for completion was circulated to POG members on 29 March, asking for a response by close 11 April).*

### **4. Temporary Accommodation April Changes - Customer Journey**

DWP led the meeting through a series of screen shots illustrating the process for a new claim where the claimant is in Temporary Accommodation. One of the key developments is the question concerning accommodation, where details concerning Temporary Accommodation are made explicit.

The screen shots showed the active signposting and confirmation screen.

For changes of circumstances where housing costs are paid through UC, there is a screen asking whether the claimants' costs have changed. If the claimant answers yes, then HB is signposted. POG members asked about Service Charges, where sometimes they are increased but there is no increase in overall costs.

DWP confirmed that that this will only affect total net changes in rent after 11 April 2018.

The meeting discussed breaks in claims, where HB becomes applicable when a new claim is made.

POG referred to the need to clarify the wording in the circular, adding that the guidance should include worked examples.

POG members pointed out the need for clarification in respect of the benefit cap, income tapers and backdating where the claim stops after 11 April 2018.

It was agreed that the Learning and Development Pack should be issued soon as possible.

## **5. Debt Management Worked Scenarios**

POG members noted the technical detail in the examples.

POG members referred to issues around variability, particularly in respect of vulnerable claimants, where deductions are causing hardship. DWP confirmed that in such cases the claimant must contact Debt Management.

POG members pointed out that the time lag in the initial Assessment Period for UC is an issue as there could be other debts with the LA, such as Water Direct, Local Council Tax Schemes (LCTS) and rent arrears. They added that this is exacerbated as the LA cannot interact with UC.

DWP explained that a 'deep dive' looking at improving the customer journey is underway, including areas such as 3<sup>rd</sup> party deductions and Council Tax.

DWP suggested that the worked examples, along with the order of priority could be issued nationally as part of an overall product on the HB debt recovery position.

The meeting discussed the order of priority.

DWP summarised:

- the worked examples, with context and percentages, could be issued nationally
- issues with Payment Deduction Programme (PDP) around the design and process will continue to be discussed at POG
- the order of priority can be reviewed after one year.

## **6. New Burdens Allocation Methodology For The Budget Measures**

POG asked about caseload estimates for HB, in relation to subsidy and budget forecasts.

It was agreed that the methodology should be discussed at the forthcoming LA Funding Group, and that details should be shared with the LA Welfare Steering Group.

DWP Housing Delivery Division (HDD) is working to the current UC roll out schedule. POG asked whether the schedule was subject to any delay, as, in some instances the 10 week advance discussions have not taken place.

## 7. Single Fraud Investigations (SFI) Issues Resolution

DWP set out:

- the context of HB fraud
- a chronology from April 2016 when the SFI roll out was completed, through to summer 2018
- an update on the Service Level Agreement (SLA) workshops.

From the discussion the following key points and topics emerged:

### SLA Workshops

- 240 LAs have attended the workshops, it is important to incentivise the remaining LAs to take part.

MI, launched in January 2018:

- MI for Quarter 1 2017/18 was issued to LAs at the end of January 2018
- MI for Quarters 3 and 4 will be issued shortly and lessons have been learned; regional averages will be included
- where LAs are showing a nil return for referrals, Performance Development Team (PDT) will engage with the LA to understand the barriers and bring about a resolution.

New Burdens Funding: test and analysis

- there are areas of concern around the funding for LAs, borne out by an exercise in Oxfordshire
- a more controlled exercise carried out with 40 LAs has been completed and the returns are undergoing analysis
- when the analysis is completed, the findings will be shared with POG, and then, if appropriate those findings can inform a business case for additional funding
- the business case will include Witness Rebuttal and the training needed for appearances in court.

The POG representatives for London Councils pointed out that there is a danger, caused by funding shortages, of LAs allocating the work to the limit of their funding.

DWP acknowledged that there are issues around Caseload Management Information (CMI) which could impact on the allocation and methodology; the target is to ensure that the right money is allocated to the right areas.

## **8. Scottish Carers Allowance**

DWP explained that following the Scotland Act of 2016 a number of social security benefits will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, the first being Scottish Carers Allowance Supplement.

DWP gave an overview of the change, confirming that there is no impact on LA processes.

POG will continue to be updated on any future developments.

## **9. LA Insight Survey Wave 35**

DWP asked POG for any feedback on the proposed topics.

POG members felt that :

- with regards to UC/HB and the impact of the changes announced in the Autumn Budget; this was too early as not all LAs have rolled out to UC Full Service, and that a better time for such a survey would be October/November 2018
- with regards to use of Universal Support, this again was too early, as the changes will be implemented in April, and as with UC/HB, a better time for such a survey would be October/November 2018
- with regards to Supported Accommodation, (long term and specialised), the key areas in LAs would be Housing departments with a background in commissioning as opposed to HB Revenues and Benefits.

## **11. AOB**

DWP advised the meeting that a workshop around data matching tools is planned to refine the product.

POG was also advised that if funding is available it is proposed to run a scan of self employed cases that have not been reviewed in the last 12 months. POG pointed that this could be useful but would probably need to tie in with case law, particularly around limited company regulations (working as a director after setting up a company). POG members were happy to volunteer or any discussions around the above two areas.

**Date of Next Meeting:** The next full meeting of POG will take place on 16 May 2018 Caxton House Room 2.30 10.30 – 14.00.

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