

Housing Benefit Direct issue 151 August 2014



ISSN 2045-6131 (Online)

Editorial

I hope most of our readers are managing to take a well-earned break over the summer. Despite the pressures of austerity and welfare reform, you have continued to deliver Housing Benefits (HB) promptly, supporting millions of people to afford a roof over their heads. I get to see the National Statistics on speed of processing a day ahead and always feel a twinge of anxiety when I open the email containing the numbers. I was really pleased (and relieved) to see that, nationally, new claims processing performance held steady in Q4 and changes of circumstance has fallen to five days. We include a link to the statistics, including individual local authority (LA) performance in this edition.

It's not all good news though as the interim statistics on fraud and error for 2014/15 show that it is still too high across all DWP funded benefits and particularly high in HB. It is clear that rising caseloads, particularly more people in employment, is a key driver for the increase in customer error but at a loss of over £1.3 billion (and rising), we need to consider what more we can do to get this under better control. Fraud and error is going to be a significant focus for DWP over the coming months and we are keen to explore what we can do, working with you, to improve performance. We will be communicating further on this shortly but, in the meantime, we are always keen to hear about any issues you face and any good practice you might be able to share with us.

This edition includes a short update on Universal Credit roll-out progress – with more claimants coming in scope every week. Universal Credit is now available to single and couple claimants in 38 areas across Great Britain.

We are offering the opportunity to attend two different workshops. A number of sessions will be held in September to share good practice on mitigating the impacts of the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (RSRS). If you are interested, you will need to get back to us by 15 August. We are also planning to run a series of sessions on reducing subsidy claim qualifications. We are keen to get attendance from Authorities with unqualified accounts as well as ones with qualifications so as to promote a sector-wide approach to mutual support. The first session is in Blackpool in September but further sessions will be arranged to meet demand.

Clare Elliott

clare.elliott@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

[Distribution enquiries](#)

Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy: Best Practice Workshops

Following on from the recent publication of the [RSRS Good Practice Guide](#), containing details of various strategies for mitigating the effects of the RSRS, we will be organising a number of Best Practice Workshops in September.

We have received many positive case studies from LAs this year and want to facilitate the sharing of this information and other examples of best practice that you have identified.

If you would be interested in attending then please register your interest with us. Once you have done so we will send you a short survey to find out, among other things, what you want to get from the event. After we receive your completed survey, we will analyse your feedback and send you an invite as soon as dates are confirmed.

To register your interest, please send an e-mail, by **5pm on Friday 15 August 2014**, to:

housing.benefitenquiries@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Speed of Processing data

On 23 July 2014 DWP published the HB speed of processing data for the 4th quarter of 2013/14. The published data shows the average days to decide a new HB claim was 23 calendar days and the average time to decide a change of circumstances was 5 days. Despite the increasing pressure on authorities, HB overall performance has remained satisfactory over the last 2 years.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-benefit-and-council-tax-benefit-statistics-on-speed-of-processing-2013-14>

Universal Credit rollout

On Monday 23 June 2014 we began our rollout of Universal Credit to jobcentres right across the North West of England. From Monday 28 July, the next four jobcentres went live – Chester, Congleton, Crewe and Wilmslow.

As part of the rollout, from Monday 30 June, we made Universal Credit available to couples in five live sites in England and Scotland. At the same time we removed the bar on people with a current HB or tax credit award from claiming Universal Credit. From Monday 28 July, Universal Credit became available to couples in all live site areas across England, Scotland and Wales.

This means that Universal Credit is now available to single and couple claimants in 38 areas of England, Scotland and Wales, providing people with stronger incentives and support to get into work and earn more money.

The full list of live Universal Credit sites can be accessed through the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/jobcentres-where-you-can-claim-universal-credit>

We are rolling out Universal Credit in a careful, safe and controlled manner, which remains the right approach, limiting the disruption to claimants.

In total over 90 jobcentres, or one in eight jobcentres in Britain, will offer Universal Credit once the North-West expansion is completed.

HB Fraud and Error Groups

The recently published National Statistics showed that HB fraud and error has increased to its highest ever reported level (5.8% of total benefit expenditure which equates to £1,380 million) in 2013/14 (preliminary estimates). The Department is working to refresh its HB Fraud, Error and Debt Strategy as a response to this rise and would like your input.

The increase has predominantly been due to a rise in claimant error with claimants not reporting variants in income and earnings timeously. Universal Credit will help to eradicate fraud and error as we go forward, however, in the meantime and in a time of austerity these high losses are not acceptable.

The Department has made tackling these significant losses a top priority and has set up a HB working and steering group who will oversee and track activities put in place to reduce the amount for fraud and error in the system and prevent more occurring. We are acutely aware of the resource constraints within local government as well as the competing demands from central government which is why we have sought Local Authority Associations (LAA) representation for both groups to ensure the views of LAs and the impact of any new activity is taken into account. We want initiatives to address the rising monetary loss to be successful and developed in conjunction with LAAs and local government and to support this, Ministers will be writing to Chief Executives shortly to reinforce the current issue and our desire to work together.

You will be hearing more about the work of the HB fraud and error groups shortly, but in the meantime we encourage you to ensure everything is being done with the resources you have to cleanse the existing caseload to make it as correct as possible, and to ensure processes are as tight as possible to prevent fraud and error creeping in.

If you have any questions about the work DWP is undertaking on HB fraud and error or you are doing something in your LA that is working well that you would like to share, please email polly.strickland@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

DWP- Local Authority Subsidy Workshops

The National Audit Office has placed great emphasis on the reduction of HB fraud and error levels and, in so doing, has expressed concern at the different issue of the high and increasing level of qualification of HB subsidy claims.

Separately from work being undertaken in regard to fraud and error, we are keen to work with LAs to address and hopefully improve the level of qualification of subsidy claims. To this end, we propose to hold a series of workshops at which the issues leading to subsidy claim qualifications are discussed and the means of addressing these issues identified. It will be important for the success of the workshops that a range of LAs attend, i.e. those which are qualified annually, to those which have made improvements in the level of qualification, to those which are not qualified. The Department views the proposed workshops as a collaborative effort to achieve the common objective of reductions in the level and number of qualified claims.

It is hoped that the first workshop will be held at Warbreck House in Blackpool on 10 September 2014.

Any LAs wishing to attend the workshops or obtain further information should contact Michael Mina at the following e-mail address: michael.mina@dwp.gsi.gov.uk