Housing Benefit Direct issue 174 February 2017

Editorial

Welcome to February's edition of HB Direct.

I'm pleased to be able to say that, despite all of the change and resource challenges, local authorities (LAs) are still improving on the time taken to process new claims to Housing Benefit (HB) and changes of circumstance. On 25 January 2017, speed of processing statistics were published on GOV.UK for quarter 2 (July to September 2016). On average, new claims were processed in 22 days and changes in 9 days; both a one day improvement on the same quarter the previous year. While this is a great achievement, I am really keen to find out more about why some claims take longer and what more we can do to ensure claims are determined without delay so we can continue to improve.

There was less encouraging news on our experimental Caseload Management Information also published on GOV.UK. This shows the percentage of changes of circumstance made, compared with better performing LAs, adjusted for the composition of the caseload. In quarter 2 this had fallen to 69%, down from 72% in quarter 2 the previous year. We are still looking at what might be driving this and whether or not Universal Credit might be making a difference to the number of changes we should be expecting to see on the HB caseload. It is clear from our engagement with LAs that there is still a lot of activity and focus around meeting the fraud and error challenge for which I am grateful.

Your National Fraud Initiative matches will be with you shortly if they haven't arrived already. You will already be familiar with these and have criteria for deciding which ones to prioritise. As you'll see from the article which follows, we recommend particular priority is given to student loans, taxi license and market trader data. I know from my engagement with Sheffield City Council, who I am twinned with, that these are some of the most productive matches.

Unreported changes in earnings remain the most significant contributor to HB fraud and error. As you will see in our final article, the Wider use of Real Time Information (WURTI) Project has been testing giving access to earnings data with a small number of LAs. The sevice will be rolled out over 2017 and will enable LAs to receive alerts when customers start or stop earning or have a change in earnings. We are currently looking at how we get our current RTI activities, WURTI and FERIS to align to make sure we maximise the benefits of access to real time earnings information. More information on roll out will be issued this month.

Also included in this issue is a short item signposting you to some revised guidance that we have published relating to the use of Discretionary Housing Payments to support claimants with housing costs on Universal Credit.

Clare Elliott
Head of Housing Delivery Division

Distribution and newsletter enquiries

National Fraud Initiative 2016/17

The National Fraud Initiatives (NFI) 2016/17 matches are being released to local authorities (LAs) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) from 26 January 2017. These matches are delivered every two years and aim to identify fraud and error in Housing Benefit (HB) and related DWP benefits using a range of data sources.

2016/17 NFI matches relating to DWP administered benefits are released directly to DWP. This should significantly reduce the volume of matches for LAs to consider. Standard HB matches will continue to be released to LAs and they will need to decide which are relevant for onward referral to DWP for investigative action. It is important that action is taken as quickly as possible to sift cases, especially for HB to student loans where many students' courses are likely to end in June 2017.

Recommended referral criteria process

- LA staff should review, but not focus exclusively on, those referrals identified as recommended matches by the NFI Tool. The expertise and local knowledge of staff plus effective use of the NFI filtering tool can also be used to identify matches with a higher probability that they indicate fraud or error.

- HB matches that require fraud investigation should be referred to DWP on the referral template which is embedded in the NFI Tool. Users should complete the form within the NFI web application and submit it. From there it will be directed to the relevant DWP email inbox. A copy of the form entries will be retained within the web application. Only matches that indicate fraud should be referred to DWP.

- Cabinet Office encourages all LAs to document their approach to each NFI report using the 'Report Comment' facility within the NFI web application.

Matches between HB and the following data should be prioritised for review:

- Student Loans data
- Taxi Licence data
- Market Trader Licence data

HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) Real Time Information (RTI) is now used widely across DWP and LAs so NFI Payroll and Pensions Data may duplicate this source. It is recommended that LAs review these cases at the initial sift stage and check to see if they have already been identified by RTI. There is no need to make referrals for Home Office to immigration data as DWP has a direct feed. The remaining match types should be considered and, any likely to indicate fraud, should also be referred to DWP.

If you have and questions regarding the content of this article you should email marie.cave@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Young Persons and Mental Health Community Partner positions now open for applications

Following the recruitment for the Lead Community Partner role announced in Improving Lives: the Work, Health and Disability Green Paper, DWP is now welcoming applications for further Community Partner positions supporting young people and those with mental health conditions.

The new Young Persons Community Partner role is an exciting opportunity to work with the third sector to strengthen Jobcentre Plus understanding about the issues young disabled people and those with health conditions face in finding and securing employment.

Young Community Partners will act as a role model to inspire young disabled people, work collaboratively with third sector organisations and work with local employers to identify targeted work experience.

As a Mental Health Community Partner you will have a lived experience or in-depth understanding of mental health conditions and the barriers people with mental health conditions face in everyday life and may encounter when seeking and sustaining long term employment.

You will help shape the support people with mental health conditions receive, develop a national mentoring network and build relationships with specialist organisations in your area.

For both opportunities, you may be interested in a fixed-term appointment opportunity or a secondment from your current organisation. Both fixed-term appointments and secondments are available for 12 months with a possible extension for a further 11 months. Organisations are also invited to offer secondment opportunities to their staff.

Further Community Partner positions will also be advertised later in February 2017 with specialisms determined by local need. Expressions of interest are welcomed at this stage.

To apply:

www.civilservicejobs.service.gov.uk/
Young Persons Community Partner (Ref: 1522942)
Mental Health Community Partner (Ref: 1522934)

For more information:

Email: Community.Partners@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Call: 0207 867 3186/0774 747 2709

Update: Wider Use of Real Time Information

DWPs' Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI) Project has been working with six LAs since mid October 2016 to test the RTI service. The service will be deployed to LAs to assist them in tackling fraud and error in HB.

RTI provides access to HMRC earnings and non-state occupational or private pension information in real time through a digital web service, the RTI User Interface. The interface will be accessed through a desktop icon and HB staff will use the HMRC information to assess the customer's entitlement and to confirm whether information provided by the claimant about their income is correct.

Additionally an alerts service will notify HB staff when the claimant and/or their partner's income from employment or non-state pension changes.

The service enables LAs to prevent fraud and error entering the system from the outset at the new claim stage and throughout the duration of the claim through alert notifications.

The Project is consulting with the LA Associations Steering Group and Practitioners Operational Group and the Project's plan is to start rolling out the service from April 2017. The Project will provide details of when roll out activities will take place for each LA around the beginning of February 2017 along with guidance and relevant learning and development products.

If you have any questions regarding the content of this article you can email rtiprojects.portfolioqueries@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Update: Universal Credit housing costs and the award of Discretionary Housing Payments

The Department has received a number of enquiries recently over the use of Discretionary Housing Payments to support claimants with housing costs on Universal Credit. Since our original guidance, Bulletin HB G12/2016, was published in December new information has become available which updates our position on the subject. We have updated the guidance and Q&A which supersedes the original version and a revised version of HB G12/2016 is now available.