

Housing Benefit Direct issue 149 June 2014



ISSN 2045-6131 (Online)

Editorial

It's my privilege to be Editor for this edition of Housing Benefit Direct. As ever, there is so much going on in the housing costs arena. It really is the place to be if you want challenge, variety and change. I appreciate it can also be pretty exhausting too, so many thanks for continuing to deliver such an efficient service to over 5 million households.

In this month's edition we look at the reasons why not all of you are using the Valuation Office Agency's VICTER system and warn you of non-availability of the Customer Information System for the weekend beginning 13 June. We also celebrate Royal Assent for the Pensions Bill which paves the way for the new State Pension from 6 April 2016.

The Performance Development Team continues to offer its services and this month we focus on some really good joint working on overpayment recovery with a group of Kent local authorities.

There is also the opportunity for some of you to come and work with us on the LADS Programme. We've had a few secondees over the years and every single one of them has been brilliant. It's an obvious and huge advantage to have practitioners with bang up to date knowledge working with us. I think it's fair to say that all the secondees really enjoyed working with the LADS Programme and went back with a whole new range of skills that proved valuable to them and their home local authorities. Please feel encouraged to apply, you won't regret it I promise.

Thanks again for all the good work.

Bill Hern

bill.hern@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

[Distribution enquiries](#)


Sharing information with the Valuation Office Agency

Here in Housing Delivery Division we're doing some work to better understand why some local authorities (LAs) are not maximising the electronic transfer of information with the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) using the recognised IT application, EIS/VICTER.

We've spoken to some LAs who do not use EIS/VICTER and to some who are achieving 100% EIS usage. From the views we have obtained it appears that there are issues around:

- transfer of requests from the LAs to VOA, both manual and IT based
- management of the requests by VOA
- collection of relevant data by the VOA
- impact on claim processing times at the LA caused by delayed responses
- improvements made to EIS/VICTER since the initial trials
- technical issues on accessibility to the system.

Some LAs expressed an acceptance of continued use of the manual system because the:

- total number of referrals was relatively low
- number of referrals, although significant was reducing (some as a result of Local Housing Allowance (LHA))
- disruption to service continuity when introducing the system was not seen to be worth the benefits gained
- numbers of LA IT initiatives already in place or planned meant  that reviewing and introducing EIS/VICTER was unlikely to happen or receive sufficient senior management backing.

Next Steps

We are now looking to further clarify and investigate these issues with VOA and if you'd like to help us please contact Rod Bennett, Housing Delivery Division – rod.bennett@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Customer Information System (CIS) For the attention of all LA benefits staff

In case you are planning any weekend overtime, please be aware that CIS will not be available between 21:00 on Friday 13 June and 07:00 on Monday 16 June 2014.

Please do not attempt to access CIS between these times. This is due to a new release of CIS; Release 14.1. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause.

Please note the new single phone number for the LA Support Team is **01253 689422**, our email remains la-st.hdd@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Changes to the State Pension from 6 April 2016

The Pensions Bill setting out changes to the State Pension received Royal Assent on 14 May 2014.

The Pensions Act 2014 introduces major reforms to the State Pension. It changes the existing law to allow the new State Pension to start on 6 April 2016.

People who reach their State Pension age on or after 6 April 2016, will be affected by the changes and have their State Pension worked out under the new rules.

Steve Webb, Minister for Pensions, said: "Royal Assent is a big milestone. Getting the new State Pension on to the Statute Book is a triumph for DWP. For the first time, we will pay people a single State Pension that supports the private pension saving we are encouraging through automatic enrolment."

For more information about the changes to the State Pension visit <https://www.gov.uk/new-state-pension>

Performance Development Team

DWP's Performance Development Team (PDT) continues to work with LAs to provide free consultancy support for all areas of Housing Benefit (HB) administration.

Effective management of HB debt continues to provide LAs with challenges. To that end, PDT works with a number of networks across the country to drive improvements in this area.

In April 2014, PDT held the first meeting of a Kent wide HB Overpayment Recovery Network Group. Discussion areas included:

- looking at the structure of recovery teams
- recovery processes in terms of how effectively LAs pursued HB debt
- the importance of an effective policy for the 'writing off' of debt
- new powers to apply a Direct Earnings Attachment (DEA) without the need for court authority ([HB G4/2013](#) refers).

Feedback for the first meeting was very positive, with Ginny Wilkinson, Revenues and Benefits Manager for Swale Borough Council commenting "the meeting gave managers and overpayment staff the chance to do some limited benchmarking around level of resources directed to overpayment recovery as well as the levels of overpayment debt. We all spoke openly about methods of good practice. In Swale we certainly came out with a list of action points following the meeting, so for us it proved extremely useful".

A number of questions were raised and resolved, as follows:

Q1 Are there time restrictions on applying the new DEA powers re: age of overpayment?

DEA can be used on any overpayment that is still within the time limit for recovery in normal legislation.

Q2 Can an LA use new DEA powers where it has previously failed on an attachment through county Court?

Yes.

Q3 Can an LA add previous court costs to the overpayment before applying the new DEA powers?

No

Q4 Can an LA apply for the new DEA powers to have debt recovered from a partners earnings?

No, an LA cannot recover from a partner's earnings.

Q5 If a DEA is in place and the customer experiences hardship, can an LA ask the employer to reduce the % rate they it seeks to recover?

Yes, an LA can send the employer a letter asking them to deduct a fixed rate which will have been based on a conversation with the customer.

If you have any other enquiries about DEAs please send them to hbandctb.overpayments@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

OR

If you would like to contact us about the services PDT can offer, please email alan.sullivan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or call 07770 543364

Secondment Opportunities: LA Data Sharing (LADS) Programme

There are secondment opportunities for talented individuals who want to come and work on the LADS Programme, as part of the Delivery Team. As an example of our work, we previously implemented the Automated Transfer to LA Systems (ATLAS), which is now the standard data delivery method for most HMRC/DWP customer data to LAs.

The LADS programme is now firmly established and has a wide portfolio of data sharing demands from major programmes and projects. Some of these will be implemented this year, including the merger of Electronic Transfer of Data (ETD) into ATLAS and the Real Time Information (RTI) data.

The emerging requirements for the future work programme are to enhance current data sharing arrangements in order to:

- smooth the introduction of Universal Credit
- ensure a fuller data set to help LAs administer Council Tax Reduction schemes
- set up an automated process to enable recovery of existing HB debt from Universal Credit
- look at the future migration of cases to Universal Credit and how we support the customer transition
- impact the data available and current initiatives to identify what future commissions can be explored.

The LADS Delivery Team needs to:

- develop a really good understanding of the requirements
- represent LA stakeholder needs
- translate those requirements into terms that stakeholders can understand, so that in developing the technical solution we are sure that it exactly meets the original requirements
- test the solution to make sure each component works and that the end-to-end process delivers what is expected.

We need people with a good working knowledge of some or all of debt data, benefits data and rent data from LAs. Knowledge of the existing data sharing arrangements would be desirable and current experience of dealing with registered providers an advantage.

Essential skills :

- experience of working in a project environment is desirable
- good communication skills and able to understand complex issues
- good team workers, able to work collaboratively and productively.

At least part of the working week will need to be in Leeds or Blackpool. There will be an expectation to be available to travel to some meetings and workshops in relation to your role.

Posts are available immediately and are offered for an initial period of six months. Successful applicants will retain current terms and conditions and be reimbursed salary and work-related expenses through current arrangements. Some assistance with travelling to work may be available subject to individual circumstances and budgetary constraints.

If you are interested in this career development opportunity please check with your LA that you can be released and then submit your CV to lads.deliveryteam@dwp.gsi.gov.uk by 20 June 2014. If you would like to know more before applying please feel free to speak to **Paddy Wild on 0113 2327327 or Jo Wood on 0113 2327634.**