



Best Mix: Planning Activities

DWP Department for
Work and Pensions

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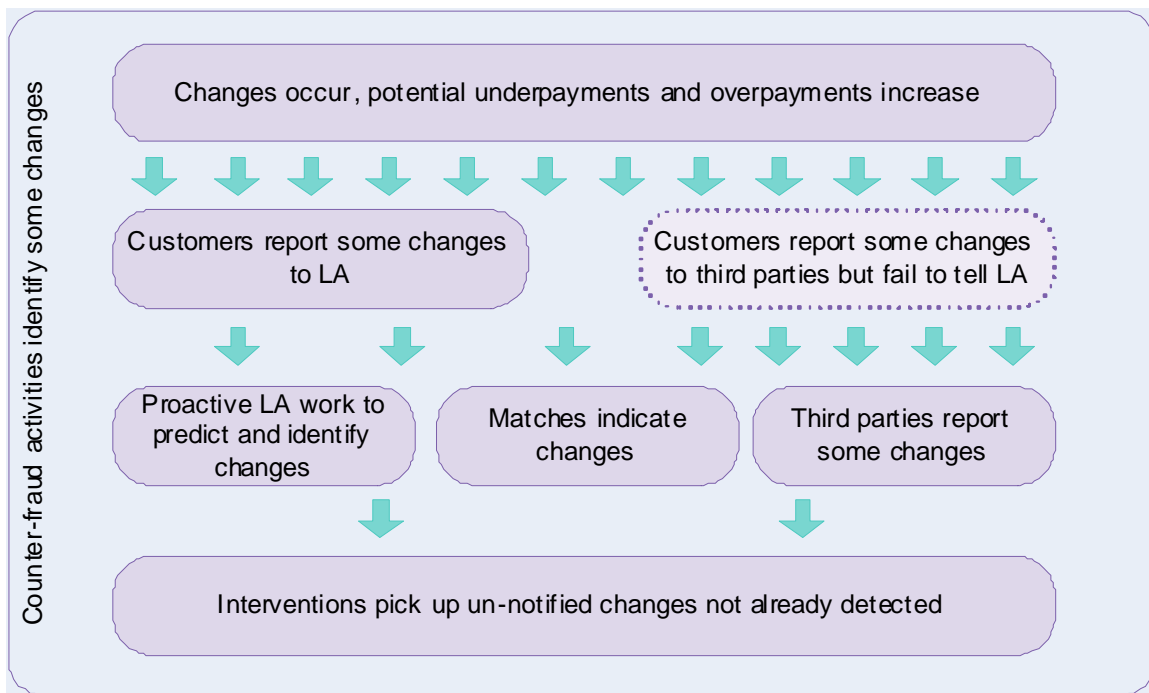
Introduction

Prior to the introduction of the revised Performance Measure 10 (which measured reductions in benefit) in April 2007, LA performance measurement was focused primarily on outputs such as the number of visits undertaken and interventions completed. Since then, and following the replacement of PM 10 with the Right Benefit Indicator, LAs have begun to develop their own initiatives to increase reporting or identification of changes of circumstances.

As yet, there has been very little evaluation of these initiatives, so we cannot provide evidence of what works best under different circumstances. However, we can describe approaches taken by better-performing LAs. We can also suggest factors that you should consider when deciding the balance of activities you need to help achieve good performance against the Right Benefit Indicator.

Finding changes

The figure below shows a model for identifying changes of circumstances. The arrows represent changes of circumstances that you are unaware of.



The figure illustrates the four main types of activity used to find changes:

1. Encouraging self-reporting by customers – engaging, educating and reducing barriers to reporting.
2. Working with partners – to identify changes and to encourage your customers to tell you about changes.
3. Proactive measures – to identify predictable changes, and correct errors.
4. Interventions - to identify changes of circumstances that might not otherwise be reported or detected.

In addition to these four broad areas, counter-fraud activities remain an important area. As well as finding changes of circumstances by detecting fraud, such activities have a deterrent effect and may encourage some customers to comply with their responsibilities to report changes of circumstances.

It is important to understand the relationship between the different levels of the model. For example if you are identifying lots of changes using proactive measures (matches and scans) or interventions, this is a sign that customers are not reporting these changes higher up in the model.

In the past, DWP placed more emphasis on the activities at the bottom of the model, setting LAs targets for the number of visits and interventions to carry out. *Recent research however suggests that the key to reducing HB error nationally is to focus higher up in the model encouraging self reporting and working with partners.*

Focusing on activities lower down in the model can also encourage a dependency culture. For example, using diary dates to check if a predicted change has been reported is good practice. However, if it has not been reported and you contact the customer, they may then wait to be asked about subsequent changes when they occur.

Choosing the best mix of activities depends on a number of factors specific to your LA. The next section ([Establishing the best mix](#)) provides some guidance on how to track and analyse data to help you determine what to do. There are however a number of general principles you should apply.

General Principles

Identify changes early

Aim to identify as many changes as possible as soon as possible after they happen. By minimising the time between a change occurring and being processed, you will

- reduce the time customers have to wait for an underpayment to be corrected;
- minimise the value of any overpayment they have to pay back;
- improve your performance against the Right Time Indicator.

You can also use proactive measures to identify changes before they happen.

Focus on encouraging self reporting

Any mix of activities should have a strong focus on encouraging customers to report changes themselves, and to report them promptly.

There are a number of barriers that can discourage people from reporting changes - to overcome these:

- customers need to know what changes will affect their benefit;
- they need to know that it is their responsibility to report the change, and to report it immediately;
- they need to know that they have to tell the LA Benefits Service;
- it should be easy for them to report the change;
- they must want to report the change.

[Engaging with Customers](#) provides guidance on designing and implementing effective engagement strategies to encourage customers to report changes themselves. You will also find ideas from other LAs in the [Example Materials](#) document. The DWP's [Error Awareness e-learning package](#) provides ideas for making best use of face-to-face contact with customers to identify likely future changes, and remind customers they must report them immediately they happen.

It is unrealistic to expect all customers to report all changes on time, and it can take time to develop a culture of self-reporting among existing customers. However, you should aim to promote this behaviour from the outset with new customers.

Work with partners

Customers may report changes to third parties, but not to your housing benefit service. Whilst you may have robust procedures in place to make sure that these changes are forwarded to you, a better mix of activities could involve these organisations giving customers a stronger message about reporting direct to the benefit service.

[Engaging with Customers](#) explains how you can work with partners such as landlords (including housing associations), other council departments - particularly housing, voluntary organisations, neighbouring LAs, and other public agencies such as Jobcentre Plus to:

- educate your customers;
- ensure that messages are consistent;
- communicate with difficult to reach customers;

Use proactive measures with care

Proactive measures are an important part of the mix, as they help to find unreported changes and also provide an opportunity to engage with and educate customers. However, they should be used with care as they can encourage a dependency culture. DWP's [Error Awareness e-learning package](#) provides guidance on using proactive measures. Make sure when contacting customers that you remind them they should have reported the change, and should report any future changes.

Interventions remain essential

Interventions act as a safety net but they have limitations:

- you may find unreported changes so late that significant overpayments have accrued;
- they can encourage a dependency culture if customers see them as a replacement for the annual renewal claim;
- they are resource intensive, particularly if they involve visiting.

However they remain an essential part of the mix of activities for a number of reasons:

- some changes of circumstances will not be picked up by other means;
- well conducted, targeted reviews provide an opportunity to convey timely information to those most in need – customers who have failed to report changes;
- the knowledge that reviews (and also counter-fraud activities) are happening can have an effect on customer behaviour.

Establishing the 'best mix'

The three basic steps to take are:

- **track and analyse** changes;
- develop **plans** in response to the findings;
- **review** progress regularly and adjust plans accordingly.

Track and analyse

The aim of this step is to establish how successful your various activities are at identifying changes and where difficulties arise, why. The sort of information you will need to establish is:

- how increases and reductions in entitlement are identified;
- whether particular groups of customers report fewer changes of circumstances than others;
- whether particular types of change are less likely to be reported than others;
- if there are seasonal fluctuations in the number of changes reported;
- how many changes result in over or underpayments;
- which errors are due to customers' failure to report changes, and which are due to workflow issues, or mistakes by staff;
- how effective your various activities appear to have been.

It is also helpful to understand:

- the rate of turn-over of your caseload;
- your customer profile with respect to information or access needs, for example:
 - customers with literacy issues;
 - those for whom English is not their first language;
 - those with visual impairment, hearing difficulties or limited mobility;
 - customers in employment or with young children;
 - pensioners;
 - seasonal workers.
- your customer risk profile.

You can get relevant data from:

- your HB computer system;
- [HoBOD](#);
- the Single HB Extract;
- HBMS data match results;
- collating the results of interventions;
- evaluating specific initiatives (see [Evaluating Initiatives](#));
- the results of any national evaluations.

Some LAs already use performance management software that could accommodate this type of analysis. Others may find the [Tracking Template](#) useful when considering what data to record, and how to analyse activities. This Excel workbook is designed to help you track progress to date and plan future activities. It provides a template for measuring the outputs from specific activities that count towards the Right Benefit indicator (reporting by customers, data matches, interventions etc). It also allows you to estimate the overall cost and the cost-effectiveness of each activity.

Develop a plan

Set targets

There are no nationally set targets for the Right Benefit Indicator; but it is a good idea to consider setting a local target if you have not already done so.

Identify activities

Use your analysis, and your assessment of what appears to have worked well to determine the best mix of activities for your authority to achieve the targets you have set. In particular try to identify ways of moving the focus of your activities higher up the model presented on Page 2 to increase self reporting of changes. For example:

If you have a high turn-over due to a mobile population, focus on educating new customers, and on working with partners, including neighbouring LAs to help you with this.

If a significant proportion of HBMS data matches relate to tax credit rules, consider how to get information to people on tax credits more effectively.

If the earnings scans from HBMS identify a large number of claims with unreported increases in earnings this shows that customers are not routinely reporting pay rises themselves.

Interventions remain an essential part of the mix. Use DWP risk lists and local risk profiling to target who to review.

There is no one programme of work that will suit every authority, but you may want to collaborate with other authorities in your benchmarking group (see [HoBOD](#)) to find out what activities they have found particularly productive.

Plan implementation

Timing is important as you will need to ensure that your team is adequately resourced to deliver the planned activities and, more importantly, process the resulting changes of circumstances quickly and accurately. Find out what other activities are going on within your finance or housing services that could impact

adversely on the initiatives you are planning. Try to avoid sending out important information on different topics to the same customers at the same time.

Similarly, if you are aware of certain changes that tend to occur at a particular time, a well-timed initiative can capture these changes just after they happen. For example, planning interventions by visit to local sheltered housing complexes around April or May should pick up unreported changes in occupational pensions if this is an issue for your LA.

You may be able to work with partners to deliver initiatives more efficiently and effectively. Other departments may be developing initiatives that could incorporate an HB initiative for little extra cost, or you could join up with neighbouring LAs to share the costs of an advertising campaign. For example, if your housing service produces information packs for new tenants, ask if they will include a leaflet on claiming HB, and another on reporting changes of circumstances.

[Engaging with Customers](#) includes more information on planning engagement activities.

Review

It is important to evaluate and review your mix of activities on a regular basis. Track what happens over time. If you find, for example, that you are successful in encouraging more customers to report changes themselves, and that proactive activities are identifying fewer changes, this is the time to review your activity mix and make new plans to build on your success.

You can use the Tracking Template to track progress against your targets and to help you evaluate the outcomes of specific initiatives. [Evaluating Initiatives](#) gives more advice on how to evaluate activities.