

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

General Information Bulletin

Department for Work and Pensions, 1st Floor, Caxton House, Tothill Street, London, SW1H 9NA
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/>

HB/CTB G1/2009

15 January 2009

Contact	Queries about the <ul style="list-style-type: none">• technical content of this bulletin, contact details are given at the end of each article• distribution of this bulletin, contact Corporate Document Services Ltd Orderline<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Email: orderline@cds.co.uk• bulletin in general, contact Kath Murphy<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Email: Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Who should read	All Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) staff
Action	For information

Contents

page

Access to the Customer Information System – Criminal Records Bureau checks	2
Security notice – CIS access to HMRC and DWP data.....	2
A27/2008 clarifications.....	3
Employment Support Allowance guidance available online at the Resource Centre	4
Changes to Income Support (IS), income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA(IB)), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA(IR)) and State Pension Credit (SPC) cases for homeowners: potential effect on Council Tax Benefit cases	4
Tackling child poverty	7
PDCS Pension Centre Liaison Officer (PCLO) expanded role	9
Statutory Instruments.....	13

As separate attachment

Pension Centre Liaison Officer (PCLO) referral sheet.....	Annex A
---	---------

Crown Copyright 2009

Recipients may freely reproduce this bulletin.

Access to the Customer Information System – Criminal Records Bureau checks

- 1 The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for access to the Customer Information System (CIS) was issued to LAs in week commencing 10 November 2008.
- 2 Please note, there is no mandatory requirement in either the MoU or GCSx Code of Connection for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for LA Benefits staff at present. It should be pointed out that this policy may change, particularly in light of the fact that DWP has recently introduced a policy of carrying out CRB checks on new entrants to DWP who will be accessing CIS as part of their duties.
- 3 The MoU asks that all new members of staff complete the mandatory Character Declaration form (Appendix A of the MoU) following training and before accessing CIS.
- 4 If the applicant declares they have an unspent criminal record the LA should take action to discover what that conviction is.
- 5 Any enquires relating to this or other CIS access queries should be addressed to
ian.golds@dwp.gsi.gov.uk (LA Support Team Manager), or
Malcolm.mattack@dwp.gsi.gov.uk (LA CIS Security Policy Management)

Security notice – CIS access to HMRC and DWP data

- 6 LAs access customer information through DWP's CIS. From July 2008 this has included access to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) tax credit data. Desktop access to CIS has helped to significantly improve service delivery to customers. However, DWP and HMRC customer information is shared with LAs on the understanding that only authorised access is permitted.
- 7 DWP's Local Authority Support Team (LAST) carries out checks on a sample of system-generated Test Checks, which LAs have conducted. In addition, DWP and HMRC interrogate CIS to carry out independent data matches and checks of accesses made by both LA and DWP staff.
- 8 These checks are carried out to provide assurance to DWP and HMRC that accesses to CIS are appropriate and that information obtained is used correctly.

- 9 Regrettably checks have identified some LA staff are committing serious security breaches.
- 10 To be absolutely clear, and by way of reminder to all LA users accessing CIS, users should not
- access their own records or the records of friends, relatives, partners, or acquaintances
 - make enquiries on behalf of colleagues in respect of their friends, relatives, partners, or acquaintances
 - share their system, Government Gateway or other identity password with their colleagues
 - access CIS for any unauthorised purpose
- 11 LAST will provide support to LAs conducting investigations and can provide audit trails showing the full access history of those under suspicion.
- 12 Anyone found to be abusing CIS may face sanctions ranging from disciplinary action to prosecution. DWP will support your LA to ensure appropriate disciplinary or prosecution action is taken, and may consider prosecuting directly under Social Security legislation.
- 13 Enquires relating to CIS access should be addressed to
- ian.golds@dwp.gsi.gov.uk (LA Support Team Manager), or
- Malcolm.mattack@dwp.gsi.gov.uk (LA CIS Security Policy Management)

A27/2008 clarifications

- 14 Please make a note of the following clarifications
- **Appendix A Annex 2**
Housing Benefit Family premium rate for one or more children for 2008 was £27.25 increasing to £27.80 in April 2009.
 - **Appendix B**
Enhanced Disability Premium - no requirement for single or couple rates. Relevant amount is 'Disabled child rate'. This was £19.60 in 2008 increasing to £20.65 in April 2009.
 - **War Pension Rate 2008 Appendix E Annex 1**
The Rent Allowance (maximum) rate for 2008 was £41.50 increasing to £43.60 in April 2009.
- 15 Apologies for any inconvenience caused.

Queries

- 16 If you have any queries please contact
Email: Phillipa.Fallowfield@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Employment Support Allowance guidance available online at the Resource Centre

- 17 Results from a recent survey on Employment Support Allowance (ESA) readiness have indicated that a large minority of LAs are unaware of the existence of operational guidance written to support the introduction of ESA. This is available at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/working-with-dwp/esa.asp> as part of a range of products produced to support the introduction of this new benefit. The operational guidance is in Section 3. The guidance itself is updated as changes occur.
- 18 Any comments or issues arising from this operational guidance are welcome and should be directed to
Email: colin.heward@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Changes to Income Support (IS), income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA(IB)), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA(IR)) and State Pension Credit (SPC) cases for homeowners: potential effect on Council Tax Benefit cases

Background

- 19 *HB/CTB Circular U3/2008* explained
- the background of recent Ministerial decisions not to reflect reductions in the Bank of England Base Rate in Income Support (IS), income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA(IB)), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA(IR)) and State Pension Credit (SPC)
 - how cases were affected by the 1.5% cut in the Bank of England Base Rate made on 6 November 2008, and what immediate action was being taken by Jobcentre Plus and the Pension, Disability and Carers Service to correct cases to achieve the Ministerial commitments
 - how CTB cases might have been affected by the reduction in IS and SPC following the change in the Base Rate, and
 - what to do if such a case was identified
- 20 This update provides you with advice on
- further action being taken by Jobcentre Plus and PDCS to compensate IS/SPC recipients where they have been unable to reverse the reduction in their benefit, and
 - how this might affect CTB cases

Corrective action being taken by Jobcentre Plus and PDCS

- 21 For five weeks starting at the beginning of February, both Jobcentre Plus and PDCS will be increasing the level of IS/SPC paid to homeowners whose benefit was reduced due to the Base Rate cut. The increased rate of benefit will be paid for five weeks in order to compensate the homeowners for the reduced level of benefit they received during December and January.
- 22 At the end of the five week period, IS and SPC will be reduced to the level they should be to accord with the Ministerial commitment.

How CTB might be affected

- 23 As explained in *HB/CTB Bulletin U3/2008*, JSA and ESA claims should not be affected.

Income Support (IS) cases

- 24 There should be no effect on CTB cases, as the rate of IS would increase for the period of the compensation payments then reduce after that period has ended. Therefore the linked entitlement to full eligible CTB should continue.

State Pension Credit cases

- 25 These cases are **CTB only** cases which could fall into four categories
- a** guarantee credit (whether paid on its own or with savings credit) increases during the compensation period, then reduces at the end of that period
 - b** the case goes from being a saving credit only case to a guarantee credit plus savings credit case during the compensation period, then returns to a savings credit only case at the end of that period
 - c** the case goes from being a saving credit only case to a guarantee credit plus savings credit case during the compensation period, then continues to be guarantee credit plus savings credit case at the end of that period
 - d** the case is a savings credit only case throughout, but there is a change in the savings credit/AIF figure at the start and end of the compensation period

When PDCS will be taking action

- 26 Two scans will be run within PDCS's IT systems, one (run on 4 January) to increase SPC to the compensatory amount, the other (to be run on 7 February) to reduce SPC at the end of the compensatory period
- Scan 1:** will increase amount of SPC on affected cases on paydays 2 February 2009 to 6 February 2009 (inclusive)
- Scan 2:** will return SPC to correct rate on paydays 9 March 2009 to 13 March 2009 (inclusive)

Action needed by the LA

Category a cases

- 27 The CTB passport should be unaffected, so no action will be necessary.

Category b cases

- 28 CTB should be paid at the passported rate for the compensation period and then reassessed using the savings credit/AIF figure effective from Scan 2.

Category c cases

- 29 CTB should be paid at the passported rate for the compensation period and should continue as a passported case following the readjustment after Scan 2.

Category d cases

- 30 A new savings credit/AIF will be generated following Scan 1. The new savings credit/AIF figure might leave CTB unaffected, if CTB is effected action will be taken:
- **if the new savings credit/AIF would reduce CTB.** You need to check with your Pension Centre liaison officer before reassessing CTB. If the officer confirms that this is a case where a compensatory payment is being made, you should not reassess CTB
 - **if the new savings credit/AIF would increase CTB.** You can reassess CTB using the new savings credit/AIF figure, and the normal change of circumstance rules for the effective date where SPC is in payment will apply
- 31 Another savings credit/AIF will be generated following Scan 2. As this savings credit/AIF figure will be the correct one, in line with Ministerial commitments, you should use it to assess CTB and adjust the amount of CTB in payment in accordance with normal change of circumstance rules.

Pension Credit Uprating

- 32 A further complication is that a small number of Pension Credit cases became dormant because of the reduction in SPC following the cut in the Base Rate, prior to the Pension Credit uprating scan being run on 20/21 December 2008, those cases will not have been uprated. PDCS is working to identify these cases so that corrective action can be taken.

Possible increase in customer queries

- 33 Because of the complexity of this situation, and the number of variations in benefit payment rates that will be notified to customers over a short period, there is likely to be an increase in telephone calls to both LAs and PDCS.

- 34 As it is not possible to produce guidance to cover every eventuality, the following lines to take are recommended:

In his Pre-Budget Report on 24 November, the Chancellor made clear that the level of support for mortgage interest, which is called the Standard Interest Rate (SIR), would be maintained at 6.08% for six months.

Some customers will experience a temporary drop below 6.08% (4.58%) because DWP's computer systems normally 'track' the Bank of England base rate, which was reduced from 6 November.

DWP's computer systems are being adjusted, and the amount allowed for support for mortgage interest will be increased above the level of 6.08% for an equivalent number of weeks that you were paid at 4.58%. Overall, customers will receive 6.08% throughout the relevant period of 15 December 2008 to 8 March 2009

LAs and mortgage lenders are being advised and there is no action you need to take.

Queries

- 35 If you require further information please contact phillipa.fallowfield@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Tackling child poverty

- 36 A less detailed version of this item has already been published in the January issue of *HB Direct* but is being repeated in this bulletin for information and appropriate action.

- 37 The Government's new Take Up Taskforce is asking LAs and their partners to show how they can help to tackle child poverty by supporting parents to take up tax credits and benefits.

- 38 Across the UK 22% of children live in poverty. These children experience the realities of disadvantage and deprivation, suffering not only from poverty of income, but poverty of aspiration and opportunity. Poverty robs them of their childhood and puts them at risk of poor outcomes in later life. Whilst child poverty exists, our children, our society, and our economy will not reach their full potential.
- 39 Benefits and tax credits are essential to tackling poverty. They provide financial support to make sure that work pays and to help families who cannot work escape poverty. The Government has redesigned the tax and benefit system to provide help for all, and extra help for those who need it most, whilst still maintaining incentives to work. This has been critical to achieving the fall in child poverty that has been seen in the last decade. However, many families are still not taking up the tax credits and benefits that they are entitled to, and live in poverty as a result. DWP modelling estimates that around 400,000 children would be lifted out of poverty if all entitlements to working age income related benefits and child tax credits were taken up.
- 40 To address this issue, the Government has set up a Taskforce of experts from LAs and the voluntary sector to develop ways to help local services, particularly LAs and their partners in Local Strategic Partnerships, improve the take up of benefits and tax credits. This Taskforce is currently looking for examples of good practice from across the UK that demonstrate how local services have supported families at risk of poverty to take up the financial support they are entitled to.
- 41 The taskforce is looking specifically for work done in the last three years, which
- looks to increase take up of a range of tax credits and benefits, and support families to manage their claims
 - aligns increasing take up with wider efforts to increase parents' aspirations and help them to understand the benefits of work
 - demonstrates good value for money, and can be replicated within mainstream budgets
 - reach families in innovative ways through different local services
 - focus on families with children who are at risk of poverty

- 42 We would welcome it if your email could answer some of the following questions
- what are the key characteristics of your local area?
 - what barriers or issues did you aim to address?
 - were there any specific groups or families that were targeted?
 - what exactly was done? (Please try and explain both what was changed at an organisational level, and the changes experienced by families)
 - how much did it cost and how was it funded?
 - which organisations were involved?
 - what impact did it have?
 - what are the key lessons that you have learned, which local services in other areas could benefit from?
- 43 If you or your partners have good practice that you wish to share, please email amy.jones@childpovertyunit.gsi.gov.uk by 20 February 2009, with outlining the details of the work you have done, and the impact it has had. You should include your name, title, email address and phone number, so that the Taskforce can contact you if they want any more detail.

PDCS Pension Centre Liaison Officer (PCLO) expanded role

Background

- 44 The LA (HB/CTB) Liaison Officer was introduced into pension centres in 2003. This was an informal role that was created for dealing with problems/issues arising during interactions between the pension centre operations and HB/CTB offices. Pension Transformation Programme (PTP) have formalised and enhanced this role with the introduction of the Pension Centre Liaison Officer (PCLO) into Transformation sites.

Note: Migration sites will not have a PCLO and will operate a business as usual service.

What is a Pension Centre Liaison Officer

- 45 The PCLO is part of the first tier management team within the pension centre and is the central liaison point between the pension centre and third parties. The PCLO will deal with escalated problems/issues arising from interactions with all Local Service (LS) and PDCS partners not just LAs. The new job role definition standardises the tasks and responsibilities of the PCLO nationally and in addition to the above their main duties include
- overseeing, maintaining and acting as a first point of contact for service level agreements and issues arising between the pension centre and third parties
 - identifying and resolving issues affecting pension centre performance and escalating to Operational Manager (Quality) where appropriate, eg delays in post or support services
 - working with Team Leaders to review performance and to address accuracy performance issues in relation to third parties, identifying potential reasons for errors and discussing actions to improve and share best practices
 - being responsible for resolving shortfalls in team performance by analysing Management Information in accordance with third party involvement, taking appropriate action to resolve and/or develop solutions and replying to any complaints from third parties

Pension Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) Partners

- 46 PDCS Partners include other
- DWP agencies, ie Jobcentre Plus, Disability and Carers Service, Child Support Agency, and The Rent Service
 - Government departments, eg Debt Management Service, The Appeals Service, Counter Fraud Investigation Division, Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs, The Home Office
 - organisations, eg LAs HB & CTB departments, Social Services/Social Workers, Health Visitors, Utility Services, alternative offices and voluntary organisations such as Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), Joint Working Partnerships, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Age Concern, Welfare Rights, Help the Aged, Money Advice Units (note - not all parts of GB will be represented by these national organisations but may engage with other local organisations via Local Services)

Note: This list is not exhaustive.

Who deals with enquiries from Partners

- 47 The Customer Adviser(s) is still responsible for dealing with the everyday general enquiries from other government departments, LAs, voluntary organisations, and local service etc and for ensuring that all the security measures and customer consent procedures are followed as per current guidelines.
- 48 The call-back procedures should still be followed as appropriate and used to identify LA CIS registered HB/CTB staff who are entitled to customer information. The type/amount of customer information that you can impart to third party partners has not changed and you must adhere to the guidance provided in relation to customer consent and implicit consent.

When would I escalate an issue/problem to the PCLO?

- 49 The PCLO should not get involved with general enquiries. They will be responsible for dealing with bigger issues that affect their pension centre as a whole or one area of it, or a PDCS partner. These will be known as escalations. To give you an idea of what an escalation is we have listed some common issues below.

Examples of escalations

- **LA** identifies an ongoing problem when trying to contact a pension centre in relation to Pension Credit which is having an affect on HB/CTB claims processing and ultimately resulting in targets being affected. The LA should escalate this problem to the PCLO who will liaise with the LA on behalf of the pension centre to resolve it.
- **PDCS** – The Claims Capture Customer Advisor (CCCA) identifies that Jobcentre Plus are not closing IS/JSA cases down correctly on a regular basis resulting in delays in processing Pension Credit claims on the Customer Account Management System (CAM). The CA should escalate this problem to the PCLO using the referral provided. The PCLO will liaise with the Jobcentre on behalf of the pension centre to resolve the issue.
- **PDCS/LA/LS** - An increase in claims (eg Pension Credit challenge) causes a backlog of work in the pension centre, or HB/CTB office or there are not enough visiting officers available which means that staff are unable to deal with queries from partners as a priority and this has a knock on affect with their work (and vice versa). Using the correct escalation route the problem can be raised to the PCLO who would act as the liaison person to keep everyone involved up to date with the current situation and what is being done to tackle it.

Examples of what is not an escalation for a PCLO

- Local service officer has rung a pension centre and has received bad customer service. They wish to make a complaint about the customer advisor. This is not an issue for the PCLO and should be handled by a team leader or operational manager.
- A customer has made a claim to Pension Credit to find they are not entitled. Unhappy with the decision they contact the pension centre to complain. This is not an issue for the PCLO and should be handled by the customer advisor or team leader.

How do I escalate a case/issue to the PCLO?

50 If you have an escalated issue that you would like to raise to the PCLO you can contact them by emailing them using the template provided. A copy of this template is sent as a separate file with this bulletin (Annex A.doc).

Local authority escalation

51 For LAs wishing to escalate issues the process is covered in the *Guidance and Good Practice Handbook*. If PDCS staff are unsure about local arrangements then they should clarify with the PCLO.

PCLO contact details

52 These contacts must only be used for escalation purpose or to evoke the Fast Track procedures, see *Guidance and Good Practice Handbook Para 10a*.

Pension Centre	Name	Tel. no	Email
Burnley	Carol Crichton	01282 688810	burnleypensioncentre.pclo@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk
Burnley	Juliet Howard	01282 688822	burnleypensioncentre.pclo@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk
Cwmbran	Amanda Bradbury	01633 488536	cwmbran.pensioncentreliaisonofficer@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk
Dundee	Irene Board	01382 513553	DUNDEEKICKSTART.LALIAISON@THEPENSIONSERVICE.GSI.GOV.UK
Leicester	Elisabeth Chadwick	0116 248 1429	LEICESTERPENSIONCENTRE.PCLO@THEPENSIONSERVICE.GSI.GOV.UK
London Pension Centre	Elizabeth McAlpine	0191 218 6108	tyneviewparkjblockphase1.londonpensioncentrepcl@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk
Motherwell	Elizabeth Brew	01698 244486	mpc.pclo@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk
	Irene Muir	01698 244613	

Pension Centre	Name	Tel. no	Email
Seaham	Andrew Bailey	0191 516 1077	SEAHAM-PENSIONSCENTRE.PCLO@THEPENSIONSERVICE.GSI.GOV.UK
Stockport	Kathleen Kelly	0161 209 4365	Stockportpensionservice.pclo@thepensionsservice.gsi.gov.uk
	Janice McFadyen	0161 209 4321	
Swansea	Raymond Jones	01792 765697	SWANSEA.LIAISONTEAM@THEPENSIONSERVICE.GSI.GOV.UK
Warrington	Janet Chappell	01925 401918	warrington.pclo@thepensionsservice.gsi.gov.uk

Note: The PCLO is not required to work after 8pm during the week or provide cover at weekends.

Queries

53 Please send any requests for advice or information to

HB-CTB-LIAISON@THEPENSIONSERVICE.GSI.GOV.UK

Statutory Instruments

54 The following Statutory Instruments (SIs) have now been laid

- 2008 No 3195, The Social Security (Housing Costs Special Arrangements) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations 2008, coming into force from 5 January 2009
- 2008 No 3241 (C.147), The Pensions Act 2008 (Commencement No.1 and Consequential Provision) Order 2008, coming into force from 19 December 2008
- 2008 No 3255, The Christmas Bonus (Specified Sum) Order 2008, coming into force from 19 December 2008
- 2008 No 3270, The Employment and Support Allowance (Up-rating Modification) (Transitional) Regulations 2008, coming into force from 20 January 2009
- 2008 No 2783, The Employment and Support Allowance (Transitional Provisions) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, come into force on 26 October 2008

55 Copies of SIs can now be downloaded from DWP's own website <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers/docs/lawvols/bluevol/> and the website of the Office of Publication Information <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/stat.htm>