

DRAFT

**The Pension Service/Local Authority
(HB/CTB Liaison)**

Guidance/Good Practice Handbook

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Foreword

This Guidance and Good Practice Handbook sets out required business standards and compliments the contents of the Service Level Agreements and the Liaison Principles between The Pension Service and Local Authorities.

This guide details good practice and focuses on how our businesses can jointly improve service to our customers.

The guide outlines practices that will enable us jointly to provide the best possible services to all our customers and highlights our joint commitment to achieving this aim.

1: Liaison between Local Authorities and Pension Centres

A: Contact

- Regular contact should be maintained between Local Authorities and Pension Centres through nominated representatives.
- A schedule of meetings should be agreed with face-to-face meetings being held at least 6-monthly.
- Pension Centres may find that meeting LAs in geographically based clusters the best way of handling the face-to-face meeting requirement.
- Both sides must ensure that nominated contact point details are contained in the SLA/Liaison Principles and that these details are kept up to date.
- Both sides must provide dedicated telephone access to nominated officers
- Arrangements should be put in place between Pension Centres and Local Authorities to ensure that additional information that is required by either party to process benefit, and is not available electronically is provided within 2 working days.
- Pension Centres and Local Authorities must have processes in place for handling urgent cases (threatened homelessness and eviction). Urgent cases must be cleared within 1 working day with interim payments being considered where necessary.
- Deductions and Overpayment Guidance can be found at page 7 of the Guidance and Good Practice Handbook.
- Agreement should be reached locally which ensures that Ombudsman queries, Councillor queries, MP/MSP/WA queries and media queries are handled within required standard timescales.
- End of year Review Process document is attached at Annex A of this handbook.

B: Role of the Nominated Officer

Each signatory to the SLA will provide an appropriate nominated contact point within their organisation. While no minimum requirement has been set, the responsibilities highlighted below should form the basis for discussion when agreeing the roles and responsibilities of the post:

- attend liaison meetings between the LA and The Pension Service making effective contributions towards closer working;
- deal with any queries effectively that cannot be resolved by the usual channels;
- resolve problems by contact with opposite number in LA or The Pension Service;
- provide up to date lists of telephone numbers and contact points;

- foster good working relationships with all parties;
- take a pro-active role in cascading information throughout The Pension Centre/LA,
- gather information and statistics to monitor SLA performance.
- agree local escalation routes for issues that cannot be resolved at the first tier level

C: Disagreements

It is important that disagreements are resolved at the ***lowest practicable level i.e.*** individual benefit processors/assessors.

It is expected that most issues that arise will be resolved through informal discussions with colleagues. Where it does not prove possible to resolve an issue through these means, it should be referred to the nominated liaison officers (At Pension Centre/LA Housing Benefit level).

Within The Pension Service and LA the escalation of continuing disagreements should be channelled through the appropriate personnel in each organisation, ranging from team leaders through to Head of Service/Centre Operations Officer.

D: Service Level Agreements

Due to the transformation of business within The Pension Service formal SLA processes have been suspended until 2008. In the meantime, both businesses are asked to sign up to and apply agreed Liaison Principles for 2006 and 2007.

The Pension Centres and Local Authorities should work to ensure that formal sign-up to the new SLA can be achieved once steady state is reached within The Pension Service in 2008.

E: End of Year Review

Although formal SLA arrangements have been suspended for 2006 and 2007, a new, more accountable End of Year Review Process is being introduced from the end of 2006. Senior Pension Service and Local Authority Management should participate in the review of business and liaison arrangements. The required End of Year Certificate is at Annex A of this Handbook.

2: Migration

- The Pension Service must ensure that Local Authorities are advised as early as possible about migration of work and movement of Local Authority caseloads to other Pension Centres.
- Local Authorities must advise Pension Centres about any changes to Post Codes in their areas as early as possible.

3: Identity and NINo Verification

The Pension Service Identity and NINo Validation Process.

The Pension Service have supplied LAs with the identification process used by The Pension Service in relation to identity and National Insurance Numbers (NINos). (HB/CTB Circular G1/2006 issued January 2006 refers) BFI have confirmed that they are content for LAs to accept The Pension Service identification in individual cases provided that LAs have confirmed that the Pension Centres with which they deal have the appropriate identification in place. If LAs have received the required process assurances and there are no other extenuating identification/NINo problems, then there is no need for LAs to visit on receipt of a completed 3-page form to establish identity.

4: National Insurance Number Tracing

- Pension Centres and Local Authorities must appoint a nominated officer with responsibility for the processes involved in tracing and allocation of NINos as defined in Multi-Benefit Bulletin 74/99. The processes to be followed both prior to and during the allocation of a NINo as a result of the introduction of Section 19 are included within HB/CTB Circular A16/99. Where initial enquiries fail to trace a NINo, the customer should be contacted for further details that may result in the need for an Evidence of Identity interview.
- Where Local Authorities request tracing of NINo, The Pension Service should endeavour to clear the request within 5 working days.
- Local Authorities should ensure that all electronic means of identifying a NINo have been used before requesting a trace from The Pension Service.
- Local Authorities should ensure 100% accuracy when passing customer provided NINos to The Pension Service.

5: Claim Forms

Whilst it is not anticipated that many HCTB1 (PCA) claim forms or their equivalents will arrive at Pension Centres the following standard will apply:

Pension Centres will date stamp forms and return 100% to the appropriate Local Authority within 2 working days.

6: Changes of Circumstances

- Pension Service staff must issue an HCTB1 (PCA) claim form to customers within 2 working days of notification of a change of address.
- In Savings Credit only cases the Local Authority will notify the Pension Centre within 2 working days of any financial changes reported to them.
- Pension Service staff should report the following to the Local Authority within 2 working days of the information, if the information is reported to the Pension Centre.

Changes to: Non-dependants
Absence from home
Changes in make up of household

In addition, in Savings Credit cases:

Where capital exceeds £16,000
Changes to the income and capital of a partner who is included in the Pension Credit claim (even where an AIP is in force)

7: Cessation of Benefit

Pension Centre staff and Local Authority staff should provide the following within 2 working days:

- Date Pension Credit payment ceased
- Date Pension Credit entitlement ceased
- Reason for Pension Credit ending
- Date Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit ceased
- Reason for Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit ending

8: Continuing Payments

Pension Service staff should identify and notify LA of cases where customer moving from IS/JSA IB to Pension Credit at age 60 or 65 to allow 4-week HB/CTB run on.

Pension Group Bulletin 145/2004 reminds pension service staff about 4-week run on.

9: Deductions/Overpayments

The Pension Centre and the Local Authority should agree arrangements at local level for providing information on overpayments and supporting documentation in Change of Circumstance cases. This may be by implementing the use of an agreed pro-forma.

Where it appears that overpayments may have arisen as a result of fraud activity, arrangements should be made with fraud sections regarding the level and supply of information.

The Pension Centre should ensure that decisions on Pension Credit cases, where there is a Local Authority fraud investigation underway, or Local Authority fraud interest has been declared, is actioned within 10 working days.

Pension Service staff must ensure that requests for deductions from Pension Credit cases in respect of:

- Rent Arrears
- CT Arrears
- CC Arrears
- Water & Sewerage Charges (Scotland only)

are actioned within 5 working days.

10: Notifications

Pension Service staff should provide ETD reports to Local Authorities within 2 working days of making the Pension Credit award.

Where checks of output received by the Local Authority via ETD identify problems relating to the quality of the information being received, the Local Authority should pass details to the Pension Centre Nominated Officer who should take steps to identify the nature of the problem.

Local Authority staff should continually monitor the quality of work received via ETD, identifying any problems or trends (minimum 1 day every quarter).

11: Yes/No Indicators

Where there is a HB/CTB interest Pension Service staff must set the Y/N indicator to Y within 2 days of actioning a Pension Credit Claim. Local Authority staff must notify Pension Service staff of any HB/CTB interest where Pension Credit is in payment within 2 working days of receipt of the HB/CTB Claim.

Where a 3-page claim form is being used, the Local Authority should allow up to 14 days for receipt of the ETD report before contacting the Pension Centre.

Following the introduction of the Information Flow Project (rolling out from June 2006), both parties should take steps to set the Y/N indicator to 'Y', where there is a HB/CTB interest and Pension Credit is in payment.

12: Electronic Transfer of Data (ETD) Guidance

- Identify random sample of ETD's to be checked.
- Check run date and effective date corresponds to RAT/IFLOW.
- Check personal details noting any discrepancies.
- In turn check income information.
- If discrepancies are found report to your nominated officer within the pension centre.

- Your nominated officer will arrange for the discrepancies to be investigated and report findings back to LA nominated officer.
- Final report will be agreed and discussed at 6 monthly review meeting.

13: Clerical Cases

If when identifying random sample of ETDs a clerical NHB(PC) report is included pass to the pension centre nominated officer to check information supplied corresponds with the information used in the clerical calculation. The pension centre nominated officer will feedback findings and include them in the final report for discussion at 6-monthly review meeting.

Pension Service staff should ensure that all clerical cases with a HB/CTB interest are annotated as such.

14: How to Obtain 3-Page Claim Form

Ordering HCTB1(PCA) and Supplementary Forms

Supplies of forms HCTB1(PCA), HCTB1(PCA) Notes, HCTB1(PC)C ,HCTB1(PC)ND and HCTB1(PC)RT are required to be produced locally or downloaded from the DWP Housing Benefit website.

Circular HB/CTB U8/2006 issued in April 2006 refers and also gives details of the website

15: Unacceptable Customer Behaviour (PVC)

Pension Centres and Local Authority staff should agree arrangements for the exchange of information and the appropriate marking of cases. The provision of this information should be reviewed on a 6-monthly basis.

16: Links with Other SLAs

Fraud:

When a case is identified that may require fraud intervention, discussion should take place between LA and Pension Service regarding the possible fraud submission. In line with existing Joint Working Procedures and local Arrangements, Local Authorities will send allegations of fraud referrals relating to State Retirement Pension and/or Pension Credit to the relevant CFIS sector, for FIBS and tracing action prior to sending the referral to PPSU for risk scoring. Local Authority Referrals that pass the risk-scoring threshold will be investigated by CFIS. (See Annex B for Flowchart).

Where The Pension Service identifies potential fraud, similar steps should be taken to notify the Local Authority.

Appeals:

Process in relation to handling appeals can be found at Appendix B Annexes B and C of the Appeals Service LA SLA.

Debt Recovery

Process in relation to handling debt recovery can be found at Appendix C Annex A of the Debt Management LA SLA.

17: Standard Enquiry Facility

Provide authorised LAs a read only access to Standard Enquiry Facility to agreed personal detail data for DWP customer's information that is stored within CIS. Access will not be available to Nationally Sensitive Accounts.

The SEF will be provided with a helpdesk to:

Manage incidents. The response time for incidents once logged within the DWP domain will be:

- **Priority 1** ASAP within 6 hours
Complete loss of access to an integral application, causing major disruption to one or more site
 - **Priority 2** ASAP within 24 hours
Faults causing disruption to a significant number of users at one or more locations
 - **Priority 3** ASAP within 1 week
Minor disruption to a single office
 - **Priority 4** As agreed with customer Minor impact to a single user.
2. Provide technical advice.
 3. Produce bulletins associated with best practices.
 4. Act as a central liaison point between expert domains.

18: Good Practice

Liaison

- Pension Service and Local Authority staff should be considered for exchange visits.
- Discuss and agree the potential for local joint projects and interchange

Suggested projects: Joint training courses; publicise each other's benefits.

- The Pension Service / LAs to ensure staff have a knowledge of other benefits so they can identify situations where a "better off" calculation is appropriate.
- LAs to display and make available The Pension Service leaflets.

End of Year Certificate

Date of Annual Review

1. We confirm that processes are in place for the LA to process the 3-page HB/CTB Claim Forms

Agree/Disagree*

2. We confirm that the Pension Centre's procedures in relation to customer identity and NINo comply with the standards laid down in the Guidance and Good Practice Handbook

Agree/Disagree*

3. We confirm that the Pension Centre complies with the guidance in relation to tracing of NINos

Agree/Disagree*

4. We confirm that we have reviewed our interlink arrangements and that any good practices have been identified.

Agree/Disagree*

5. We confirm that we have examined our end-to-end processes and have identified areas/actions for improvement (attach details of review plus agreed actions on a separate sheet)

Agree/Disagree*

6. We have reviewed our business trends and have identified any recommendations/actions (recommendations/actions to be recorded on separate sheet)

Agree/Disagree*

7. We have reviewed our liaison arrangements and confirm that our contact arrangements are being maintained and that our Nominated Officer details are up-to-date

Agree/Disagree*

8. We have complied with minimum requirements to meet face-to-face on a 6-monthly basis.

Agree/Disagree*

9. We have complied with the Procedural Requirements set out in the SLA.

Agree/Disagree*

Signed:.....Manager
Pension Centre

Signed:..... Manager
Local Authority

(Delete as appropriate – if there is disagreement, please provide details and any remedial action proposed or taken to resolve)*

We have identified the following Good Practices that may assist other areas of the business: (please describe)

