

Housing Benefit Direct.....

March 2009

Issue 87

Editorial

I know this is a really busy time of the year for you, as on top of everything else you have to deal with the annual billing exercise. And of course it is a very busy time anyway because of the extra workloads. We are also particularly busy here, as we prepare for



the forthcoming consultation on Housing Benefit reform. We don't yet know exactly when this will be launched but there is a commitment to consult during the first part of the year. It was good to be able to share some of the key themes coming out of the Housing Benefit Review when both my colleague Angie Cannizzaro and I spoke at this year's IRRV benefit conference in Southport. The emphasis has been on working age customers and what more we can do through Housing Benefit to support the wider strategic objective to help people into work. Another key theme is fairness where we need to consider whether the amount of benefit we pay to some recipients is fair to ordinary families not on benefit who have to make the choices we all make between the quality, size, location and price of property that they occupy. We look forward to debating these issues, and many others, with you in the coming months.

My other key theme this month is Government Connect. Inside, you will find an article signed by me and by the Government Connect programme manager, Philip Littleavon. This article is much longer than we normally allow in HB Direct but we have made an exception in this case because of the importance of the message. We want to reassure those authorities who are engaging with the project and doing all they can to comply with the Code of Connection. But we also want to warn any authority that is not engaging that they risk losing access to DWP data. The article is designed to explain the processes in some detail so that, hopefully, everyone is clear what needs to be done to ensure access to our data is protected. We are very pleased with the progress we are making overall but we do need everyone to keep at it!

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division
Email: Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Correction to Bulletin G3/2009 - Employment and Support Allowance: guidance on 'better buy'

In *Bulletin G3/2009* we advised you that further guidance concerning the procedures for swapping which member of the couple is the HB/CTB customer had been placed on the website in 'ESA – your questions answered'. We also provided a link.

The link given was to an earlier version of 'ESA – your questions answered'. The correct link is

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/working-with-dwp/docs/esa-questions-answered-feb09.pdf>

The guidance starts on page 18.

Any enquiries related to this item should be sent to
Christine.Watkins@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Contacting the Child Benefit Office

LAs who wish to contact Child Benefit Office for information about HB/CTB, should make the request in writing on headed note paper, faxed to **0191 2251254**.

This section is staffed by the Correspondence Team who will call you back by telephone.



Electronic transfer of HB/CTB claim data to LAs (e-Transfer)

The e-Transfer Project pilot exercise, which is to send HB and HB/CTB claim information from Jobcentre Plus offices to LAs electronically rather than by hard copy, will start shortly, and we are now preparing for national rollout of this new process.



To ensure that this goes smoothly we propose to have a single point of contact for the HB/CTB business side in each LA during rollout. Last month we wrote to LA Benefit Managers asking if they will take on this role or arrange for details of another suitable contact to be provided.

Having a single point of contact will help ensure that all staff impacted receive the same messages regarding implementation activity, and how and when changes will affect them. They will also distribute project communications and provide a central point of contact for queries from the LA for escalation to the project.

Our Government Connect colleagues have already established contact with IT sections in LAs to ensure that all necessary connections are in place for e-Transfer to work successfully, and we have requested that Jobcentre Plus offices also provide a single point of contact. Liaising with IT colleagues to drive the process forward will also be a vital part of the LA business contact role.

If any benefit managers have not yet responded to the letter issued via e-mail in February please do so now.

If any benefit manager did not receive the letter issued via e-mail in February please contact the project.

If you have any queries please contact us on ☎ QH.HBInfoFlowsProgramme@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK

Round four for benefit thieves

Benefit thieves will be in the spotlight once again on 9 March 2009 when the next phase in the Department for Work and Pension's 'We're Closing In' campaign rolls out in 40 LA areas.

This is the fourth burst of campaign activity since its launch in September 2008 and research shows that it is driving home the message that benefit fraud is a crime and there is no escape from detection.

This time, press, radio, and outdoor advertising will be used in the target LA areas along with editorials in lifestyle magazines and supporting press releases.

You have been doing a great job supporting 'We're Closing In' using posters and DVDs available via the campaign web site www.dwp.gov.uk/benefit-thieves/local-authorities. The posters carry the campaign messages and can be customised with your own details.

For more details contact Jenny Bradley
☎ jenny.bradley@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
☎ 0113 251 9887



Performance and Good Practice Guide – good practice around homeworking

The Performance and Good Practice Guide's good practice on homeworking has recently been expanded. This additional good practice has been drawn from the updated Home Working report which can be read in full using the following link <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/performance-value-for-money/value.asp#check>

You will find the homeworking good practice in *Part 2 Good Practice, Maintaining a Skilled and Competent Workforce*, of the *Performance and Good Practice Guide* on the HB/CTB section of the DWP Resource Centre website – see http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/performance-value-for-money/performance-guide/parts/skilled_and_competent.asp

If you have any suggestions for enhancements to the guidance or additional good practice please contact us at ☎ Performance-framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

An important message: Government Connect and the DWP Data Access Policy



Government Connect has featured regularly in HB Direct over the last few months but, as the programme is now reaching a critical stage, we think it is important to spell out very clearly what the position is. In particular, as we're sure you know, it is DWP's policy that access to the Customer Information Service (CIS) will be withdrawn from any LA that doesn't have an agreed exemption and hasn't taken the necessary steps to achieve a secure connection by 31 March this year. So authorities not compliant with the Code of Connection (CoCo) by the 31 March 2009 will be unable to access DWP data, including CIS, on 1 April unless they are exempt. That policy was spelt out in a letter from our Permanent Secretary, Leigh Lewis, to all authorities last year and that remains our policy. But we want to explain in more detail what this means in practice.

First, we should say that a growing number of authorities have completed the process and now have a functioning, secure connection to CIS. Congratulations to all of you!

Last year, a number of authorities secured an exemption from the 31 March deadline. Exemptions were granted only to authorities who were able to demonstrate to Government Connect that they had a plan in place that would deliver everything that was required, but not by 31 March. Authorities in this position have committed to a revised delivery schedule beyond 31 March; they need to be pressing ahead with the plans they agreed last year with Government Connect.

Many more authorities are well advanced and at various stages in the process. To those authorities we would like to say 'keep it up'; it may be a lot of hard work but we know you will find that it is worth it in the end. We do understand that the process can be quite arduous and you may find that your CoCo may not be approved on first submission and that various actions need to be undertaken before Government Connect can re-assess it. It is important that authorities in this position press on and deal promptly with any actions that have been identified. There are certain mandatory elements to the CoCo and an authority has to meet all of these in order for it to be approved. If you are in any doubt at all concerning the status of your CoCo application then we would urge you to contact the Government Connect project team.



And if, for any reason, a non-exempt authority has been working towards CoCo compliance by 31 March experiences an issue that may compromise achieving compliance prior to the deadline then this should be quickly escalated by the authority to Government Connect. The escalation should be in writing to Anna Smith (Implementation Manager) and Philip Littleavon (Programme Director) and from the authority's Section 151 Officer. The Government Connect team will urgently convene a telephone conference to discuss the issue and decide with the authority on the most appropriate course of action. The Government Connect team may grant further exemptions for a specific, agreed period of time to authorities where there is a good reason to, where the authority is formally committed to Government Connect implementation, and has a fully resourced plan to achieve compliance.



Regrettably, there are a few authorities that have been slow to engage with Government Connect and, if your authority is in this position, you really are leaving it very late and there must be a real risk to your continued access to CIS after 31 March. We do urge any authorities in this position to contact Government Connect immediately. We know that there may be a number of reasons for your delay but it is important that we know what those reasons are. If there are aspects of the CoCo that you are struggling with then the Government Connect team may be able to help you - they are certainly willing to do so. No reasonable request for help will be refused. But if you do not engage with the Government Connect team then they will have little alternative but to assume the worst and may feel the need to write to your Chief Executive to set out clearly the risks your authority is facing.

We appreciate that, if you are reading this, you are probably in the part of the local authority that deals with benefits. It may well be that engagement with Government Connect is dealt with in another part of your authority, getting the secure infrastructure in place raises many IT issues and so this may be being dealt with by an IT specialist. It may be that they don't appreciate the very serious implications for the authority of losing access to CIS. If you are in this position we urge you to talk to your colleagues and impress on them the importance of getting a secure connection, you don't need me to tell you the serious consequences for benefit delivery if access to CIS is lost.

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Finally, Government Connect has agreed with *OGCbuying.solutions* that it can activate GCSx circuits for a limited (eg 24 hour) period ahead of CoCo compliance to enable the reconfiguration services to be delivered and the GCSx circuit to be tested. This agreement is conditional on the authority's CoCo submission having no outstanding MUST FAIL actions. Government Connect is currently seeking to schedule the provision of live configuration services with authorities on this basis and will appreciate help and cooperation to avoid the building-up of an implementation bottleneck. Early scheduling of the live configuration service will be much appreciated. The first step is for your authority to complete the Pre-Configuration Checklist which has been recently sent to your IT leads. Please complete and return this to Government Connect as soon as possible. The team will then make contact to offer a date for the on-site support; we ask that authorities are as flexible as far as possible in agreeing to offered dates.



Some authorities may achieve compliance with the CoCo on or before the 31 March 2009, but will not have received the services provided by Government Connect to support the reconfiguration of IT services to use GCSx. With so many authorities approaching compliance on or around the 31 March it is inevitable there will be some delay in activating the circuits and reconfiguring services. DWP and Government Connect will not of course inconvenience these authorities and the DWP Data Access Policy will not be enforced during the intervening period.

Philip Littleavon

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Why LHA Rates are calculated to the nearest penny

Several Housing Benefit Managers have raised queries over the way the LHA is calculated.

Why doesn't The Rent Service (TRS) round up the figures for LHA?

The Rent Officers (Housing Benefit Functions) Order 1997 is the statutory instrument that sets out the determinations that are to be made by rent officers.



The Order is very specific when it comes to calculating the LHA. It states

'Where the median rent is not a whole number of pence, the rent must be rounded to the nearest whole penny by disregarding any amount less than half a penny and treating any amount of half a penny or more as a whole penny.'

The LHA is a calculation and has to be rounded to the nearest penny.

Why does the LHA change each month and why occasionally are there small monthly adjustments, say 11p per week?

The LHA is a median calculated from a rolling 12 months list of rents. The list changes each month as new data is added and the 12 month old data leaves the list. It is unavoidable that it will change over time as it tracks the broad changes in the market. Although LHAs have delivered the stability anticipated across BRMAs, the changes however small, demonstrate that the LHA is properly representative of changes in the market. It is inevitable that you will see changes in LHA rates, even by a few pence occasionally.

Gary Trent
Stakeholder Management
The Rent Services

Update on LHA rates for large properties

As notified in the last HB direct, we are still proposing that this change is introduced from 6 April 2009. This is to let you know that our Ministers have agreed to extend the transitional protection from **13 to 26 weeks for existing customers**. We will provide more details in the General Information Bulletin next week. We are also preparing some draft letters and leaflets to support the change so please look out for them over the next couple of weeks

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