

Housing Benefit Direct.....

June 2009

Issue 90

Editorial

Following last month's Housing Benefit Direct, I have received several invitations to visit local authorities. I am really grateful to receive them and I promise to reply to everyone soon. But just now we are still working hard here preparing for a consultation exercise on Housing Benefit reform. So I can't accept any invitations until we know when we will be consulting. Unfortunately, I still can't say for sure when exactly this will happen but I hope it will be soon and do look out for further messages about it. At that point we will want to come out and attend as many events and conferences as we can!



We also hope to say some more shortly about the impact of rising unemployment on HB administration, which we are keeping closely under review. We will be discussing the case for additional resources and their distribution with your local authority associations. Meanwhile, we have included inside an article from a company wishing to make you aware of their services around training up new staff. As ever, we are happy to do this, because we want you to have any useful information that might help you at this difficult time, but we cannot of course endorse any particular product or company. If others want a similar mention please write to us.

We also include an article this month about temporary accommodation. For some time, we have been working on reforms to the rather complex way that Housing Benefit is calculated for customers in properties leased from the private sector. Ministers have now agreed that we should propose new arrangements along Local Housing Allowance lines and consult with you on the way forward. A lot of people across several departments, and from a good number of authorities, have been involved in putting these proposals together and I am very grateful for all the hard work that has gone in to getting us to this stage.

Finally, I wanted to mention that we continue to work on making the links between DWP and local authorities more efficient and secure. I was at our Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme Board today, which I chair, and we had a very interesting presentation about some preliminary work we are doing on a new way of giving you prompts from the Customer Information System (CIS). Ultimately this might be a way of modernising the rather antiquated ETD system, and there is certainly scope to provide prompts on a wider range of changes than you get currently, including changes to tax credits. Watch out for more developments!

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

We are on the move



The Housing Benefit Fraud and Error Policy team (HB FEPT) will be moving to The Fraud and Error Strategy Division (FESD) from 1 June. This follows a promised review of the team's location after we created the Benefit Strategy Directorate and Benefit Performance Directorate.

The FESD, led by Deputy Director David Barr, covers fraud and error policy for all the other DWP benefits, and this move will ensure that HB fraud and error is fully embedded in the wider departmental approach, with scope to deliver more streamlined measurement, policy and action across benefits.

This may mean that there will be a change in the team's priorities and organisation in the longer term, but we will, of course, continue to work closely with our colleagues in LAPD to make sure that (HB) Fraud and Error policy continue to support your objectives around performance and efficiency of administration.

HB Information Delivery (HBID) data development

We are aware that a number of referrals are being issued where income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)(IR) is in payment. In order to remove these cases from being issued we are in the process of amending all the necessary rule specifications. Until these amendments go 'live' (which is not possible until Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) has been fully rolled out), interim measures have been put in place in order to prevent these cases from being issued.

Due to the team being restructured we are issuing this guidance surrounding data scans

- for the purposes of fraud and error there will be no more than two scans per year provided free of charge. However, if during the design or coding of the scan it is established that additional IT supplier charges will occur, the LA will be advised of the (additional) cost before a decision to go ahead is made
- a charge will be payable for any requests for scans with no fraud and error involvement

The average price of a scan which may be requested over and above the two free scans is approximately £800. This is of course dependent on the complexities of the development of the scan and could be more.

New rule development

If any LAs have ideas about what future new rules they would like to see please e-mail them to our team

✉ LYTHAMSTANNES.IFDPEELPARKDDT@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK



Benefit thieves get a TV warning

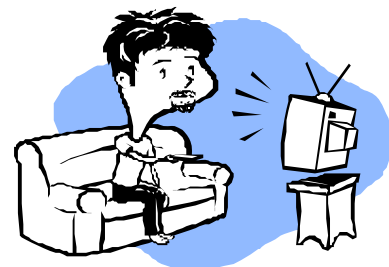
Benefit cheats will be reminded once again that '*We're closing in*' when the successful TV ads promoting the DWP's targeting benefit thieves campaign are screened again in June and July.

The TV ads spearhead a six week campaign run starting on 6 June 2009 which will also include regional press and radio advertising in forty target local authority areas.

LAs have been successfully adding their support to '*We're closing in*' by 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 LA details.



This is the third run for the distinctive TV and radio commercials with a voice-over by

Ralph Ineson of Finchy from '*The Office*' fame and featuring two 'fly on the wall' benefit fraud scenarios, following the culprits as they commit the crime.



For the first time, the campaign also includes a warning to people contemplating going abroad and claiming benefits they are not entitled to. Advertising during July and August at UK airports and in flight magazines will contain a stern reminder that they will be tracked down and punished.

More advertising in June and July in the classified columns of regional newspapers will remind benefit thieves about not declaring 'cash in hand' and 'living together'. A new classified ad will target people scanning the 'holiday lets abroad' columns looking for a chance to lap up the sun whilst fraudulently claiming benefits.

For more details contact Jenny Bradley at

✉ jenny.bradley@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or

☎ 0113 251 9887

Sharing information quickly and safely - Using your GCSX connection to speed up claims processing

LAs are now either connected or due to be connected to the Government Connect Secure Xtranet (GCSX) over the next few months.

This link is essential to the new In and Out of Work processes as it enables secure electronic information transfer between DWP, HMRC and LAs. But the good news is that the possibilities for transferring data extend beyond this. LAs may also wish to explore the use of this connection for sending data to each other (subject to usual data protection and MoU rules).

Provided that the sender and receiver are both live and connected to GCSX it is possible to send information (that would normally be sent by other means) via this secure method.

For example, when you receive an electronic HB/CTB claim from DWP via GCSX but the customer has a rental liability to another LA, it is possible to forward a copy of this claim data by GCSX from one LA to the other for the administration of HB/CTB **providing both have the secure connection**. This will ensure that the HB/CTB data is received by the correct LA securely and will remove the need for courier transfer or for the customer to make two separate claims.

Sharing data in this way, as well as using GCSX to send specific benefit-related (ad hoc) enquiries can be managed locally between LAs and DWP.

It is important to note that whilst this method is quick and secure it must **not** be used to send information that would not otherwise be shared. (Normal data protection rules apply).

For examples of how GCSX may be used and more information visit <http://www.govconnect.gov.uk>

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division, will be interested to hear about examples where GCSX has been used to provide a better service to customers or to provide services more efficiently. Please email your examples to Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



The Kickstart Programme

In April 2009, the Government made £45m available to local authorities benefits departments to assist them in dealing with increased workload due to the current economic situation.

Many benefits teams have found that the challenge to the organisation is to find a staffing solution that is financially sustainable in the long term.

Traditionally, recruitment for benefits roles has involved a somewhat restricted approach with candidates initially having to meet essential experience criteria in order to be considered for employment. This works well in a candidate rich market but can impede team growth if, as now, there is a shortage of experienced benefits staff within the sector.

In reality, there is only so much overtime your staff can sustain and only so many contract staff the budget will allow. So, how do you find the much needed additional resources to handle the increase in workload, magic them out of thin air? Well, now you can.

Kickstart is a programme developed and delivered by Training Synergy and has been building affordable and effective benefits teams for local authorities for over 10 years. The Kickstart programme takes a broader approach to the issue of staffing by retraining both existing staff from other departments and individuals new to the organisation.

Simply put the programme sources and screens capable individuals with transferable skills and then puts them through an intensive training and assessment programme, after which you then select the most suitable candidates.

The Kickstart programme has been delivered to over 100 organisations and placed in excess of 2000 people.

For more information on how Kickstart can help you make the most of the additional funding contact: Training Synergy on [Tel: 0800 072 5900](tel:08000725900) or email info@trainingsynergy.com

NB: Whilst we are happy to include this advert we cannot endorse this product.

Housing Benefit subsidy reform for customers living in temporary accommodation

We are pleased to announce that Ministers have given the go-ahead for us to proceed with proposals to reform Housing Benefit subsidy for customers living in temporary accommodation.

The proposed scheme was developed last year with the help of a temporary accommodation working group made up of officials representing various stakeholders including the four main local authority associations.

It is our intention to replace 'thresholds and caps' (which currently apply to homeless customers living in Private Sector Leased (PSL), licensed and Bed and Breakfast accommodation) with a new funding scheme, to come into force from April 2010.

For PSL and self-contained licensed accommodation, the new formula would combine two elements (*to form a single subsidy cap*), as follows

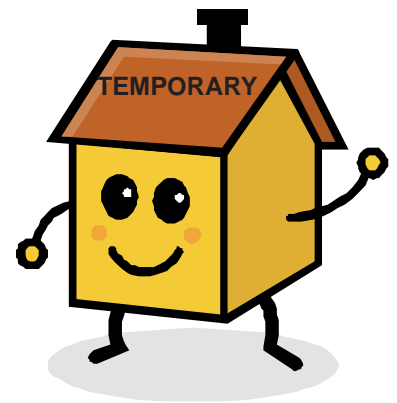
- 1 the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate less 10% for the size (up to 5 bedrooms) and location of the *property* in which the household has been placed
- 2 plus either
 - £40 towards management costs if the placing local authority is in London, or
 - £60 towards management costs if the placing local authority is outside of London.

For customers living in non self-contained licensed and B&B accommodation, the new subsidy cap would be the appropriate one-bedroom LHA rate with no additional amount payable for management costs.

We believe this proposed subsidy scheme would be fairer for local authorities than the current model and, in London in particular, would encourage more local authorities to charge customers a reasonable rent for the type and location of the property occupied.

Full details of the proposals (and the opportunity to feed in your comments) will be available as part of a forthcoming consultation exercise, which is expected to commence in July this year.

📧 joseph.stacey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



Non availability of NIRS2

Please note that NIRS 2 (National Insurance Records System) will not be available from **Friday 19 June 2009 to Wednesday 24 June 2009**.

Although LAs do not have an interface with NIRS2 it is used by

- DWP to update CIS for address data
- Pension Service Computer System (PSCS)/Job Seekers Support Allowance Payment System (JSAPS) for Contributory benefits

Any downtime will impact on the ability of DWP to calculate **Contribution** entitlements for Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and State Pension, meaning a claim will not be assessed during this period therefore award data will not appear on CIS.

Further information is available from 📧 HBSDMP.WWEG@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK

