

# Housing Benefit Direct.....

July 2009

Issue 91

## Editorial

I hope you are enjoying the untypically warm weather we are having, and that you will soon be able to get in a holiday if you have not had one already. This month you will see an article about supported (exempt) accommodation. We are still intending to do some external research on this but meanwhile we are asking for more help in trying to assess what is happening in this area. We know all too well that this is a significant concern for you and we are very grateful for those authorities who have already given us information.



I am pleased that we have been able to distribute a further £30m to you to help cope with the increased workloads in 2009/10 arising from the downturn. I hope this will help you maintain staffing levels and where necessary recruit more staff. We are working hard to get SHBE fit for purpose in all areas, and caseload stats are a key priority. It would be really good if you could do everything possible to help us get the right information. We are working towards publishing data over the summer. I appreciate just how problematic it has been not to have clear publishable statistics for so long, but I believe we are making good progress.

I know I keep saying that we will be consulting on Housing Benefit reform shortly, but just when we think we are on the point of publishing a consultation document, we seem to be affected by a new development. Understandably, our new Ministers Yvette Cooper (Secretary of State) and Helen Goodman (Minister with responsibility for Housing Benefit amongst other things) will want to look afresh at what we are saying. I don't know yet how long this will take, though we have already started discussions about it. Hopefully it won't be long and I will of course let you know as soon as possible. There is a firm commitment to consult. For example, you will see a reference (on page 41) to the HB consultation in Building Britain's Future, a wide-ranging policy document just published by the Government.

Finally, on fraud and error, we have been able to publish some statistics (which come through a fully QA'd process) and again there are some encouraging results. We have started to make some inroads into customer error and we know which areas to address. And the fight against fraud is holding up well. A really good achievement!

*Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division*  
Email: [✉ Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

## New DWP website

A new-look DWP website was launched on 30 June 2009.



Besides the new design, you'll notice all customer information on benefits and pensions has moved to Directgov. We are making this clear to users, with lots of prominent Directgov signposting around the site for the first few months.

You can reach information for local authorities (LAs) under the 'Browse by your role' button on the homepage and from the drop down menu in the left hand margin of every page, [www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff)

The structure and content of the HB pages remains the same, but many of the URLs will have changed, so you will need to update any bookmarked pages.

The changes to the website reflect a new focus on information about the Department and its pre-legislative programme, alongside specialist information for partners.

Please let us know what you think of the new DWP website and the information for advisers by emailing [✉ internet.website@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:internet.website@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

**DWP** Department for  
Work and Pensions

## In and Out of Work process



The roll-out of the In and Out of Work process really picks up pace this summer, as more and more LA areas are due to start using the streamlined process.

The process – which joins up the services of Jobcentre Plus, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and LAs – makes it easier for certain customers to move into and out of work and still claim the benefits they are entitled to. Jobcentre Plus becomes the customer's single point of contact for gathering information not only for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Income Support (IS), but for Tax Credits and Housing and Council Tax Benefits (HB/CTB).

In and Out of Work has been rolling out since October 2008 and at the time of writing over 70 LAs have adopted the new process. Feedback has been positive and some of the benefits already enjoyed by LAs include

- reduced double handling at information collection and exchange points
- improved end to end processing times as customer information is collected and shared more quickly
- a reduction in overpayments because the LA gets information about the customer or partner starting work on the day it is reported to Jobcentre Plus
- better information security (thanks to secure, electronic information sharing)

It continues to save customers the hassle of telling three different organisations about changes to their circumstances as they move into and out of employment, and it ensures that the correct benefit is paid to them at the correct time.

Roll-out is planned to be complete across England, Scotland and Wales in early 2010. For more information take a look at the In and Out of Work section of the DWP website, or contact the project at

✉ [IOW@JOBCENTREPLUS.GSI.GOV.UK](mailto:IOW@JOBCENTREPLUS.GSI.GOV.UK)

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## HB/CTB backdating survey closes on 31 July 2009

When changes to the HB/CTB backdating rules were introduced in October 2008, the Government said that it would review their impact at the end of 2009 before making a further reduction in the maximum backdating period for working age customers from six to three months. Since 2 March, DWP has been running a survey on its internet site to gather evidence to inform this review which can be found at

📄 <http://dwp.gov.uk/consultations/2009/hb-ctb-backdating-questionnaire.asp>

The survey is in the form of a questionnaire which stakeholders such as welfare rights agencies and LAs can use to submit views and evidence to contribute to the review. There is also a section for contributions in the form of case studies from individuals such as HB/CTB decision makers.

DWP would like to obtain as many responses as possible before the survey ends on 31 July, and would welcome contributions both from an organisational and individual perspective. Thank you to those who have returned questionnaires already - please note that you can send in as many case studies as you like (section C of the questionnaire), so we are happy to accept more of these even if you have already participated in the survey.

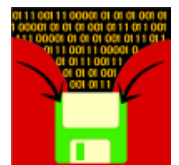
If you have any questions about the survey please contact Richard Grennan, Housing Benefit Strategy Division,

☎ 020 7449 5328 or ✉ [richard.grennan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:richard.grennan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

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## Encryption software

As you are aware as a result of the tightening in security, all transfers of data between LAs including the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) and the Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) files are required to be encrypted using PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) encryption software.



We will soon be in the process of transferring LAs on to the Generic File Transfer System (GFTS) that is to be incorporated into Government Connect. This system has already been successfully trialled for the E-Transfer Project in various locations and will be the standard which will be used.

Although this new system of encryption and delivery will be the future national standard, I am writing this note to remind you that even if you are live with Government Connect, until you are specifically told by DWP to discontinue the use of the PGP software you should continue to use this delivery method and encrypt as normal.

If you have any problems with this communication, please do not hesitate to contact the communications team by E-Mail-

✉ [peelpark.ifdhbidcomms@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:peelpark.ifdhbidcomms@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

**Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to [HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)**

## Fraud and Error - latest performance figures!

The latest fraud and error estimates were published on Thursday 14 May 2009.

They show that since 2002/03 the amount of overpayment due to HB fraud has fallen by over a third.

Although customer error has increased since the last report in October, it has reduced by 23% since it peaked in 05/06. We know that you have done much to focus on this area of error and the results show a real achievement.



You are also making much progress in reducing the amount of overpayments due to official error which is at its lowest ever level at 0.9%.

In fact, there has been a 10% reduction in HB expenditure overpaid due to fraud and error from 5.0% to 4.5%, which is at its lowest level since measurement began in 2002/03. This is a very encouraging result.

You may also be interested to know that initial analysis about the reasons for under and overpayments show us that earnings and Tax Credits are the biggest contributors to incorrect benefit payment. This reinforces the view that these are some of the main areas of complexity – so there is still some work to do and we hope to be working with you to tackle this very important area in due course.

If you wish to see the full report it can be viewed at [http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fraud\\_error.asp](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fraud_error.asp)

## SHBE (Single HB Extract) data queries

We have been reviewing our current process for handling queries from LAs and software providers.

From **Wednesday 1 July 2009** Information Delivery (IfD) will take responsibility for the management of Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) data queries from Housing Research and Analysis Division (HRAD).

Chris Fuller will take the lead in managing and answering these queries via the generic e-mail inbox.

IfD will take the lead responsibility for reviewing, commissioning and drafting any necessary updates or changes to the specification or guidance notes.

Contact [IFDDMS.HBMSDIT@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:IFDDMS.HBMSDIT@dwp.gsi.gov.uk) for queries around

- software problems/issues
- the content and format of fields on the SHBE
- the SHBE main specification and guidance, and
- technical issues around the information that should be recorded in different fields on the scan

## Supported 'exempt' accommodation



We need your help. We are reviewing the way supported 'exempt' accommodation is dealt with by HB. These are cases currently assessed under the pre 1996 rules where care, support or supervision is provided by or on behalf of certain not for profit landlords.

We recognise that the rules no longer fit with the way care is provided for individuals today. However for work to progress we need to gather more information. Research in this area has been delayed due to the DWP wide embargo on data transfer, so until this can proceed we ask for your assistance in data gathering.

We shall shortly be sending out a questionnaire to approximately 50 LAs where we know partial subsidy on HB expenditure in this area has been high. This will ask for details of average rents and the main 'exempt' accommodation providers in your area if known so that we can seek their input. If you are sent a questionnaire we would ask that you do your best to provide as much information as you can. If you are not sent a questionnaire but would like to offer assistance please email us at [Jon.Hyde@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Jon.Hyde@dwp.gsi.gov.uk).

Along with pressure groups, LAs have been pressing for change and clarity in this area. Your support in providing information is therefore vital if we are to make progress in taking this work forward.

## Moredirect – ideas and suggestions welcome



I am now starting to plan the next edition of *moredirect* which will be issued at the end of September 2009. So I thought that this would be a good opportunity to ask you if you have ideas or suggestions for topics that you would like to see featured in the next issue of the magazine, this is your magazine after all.

What do you think of the magazine? Do you have any comments about the layout and format of *moredirect*. We would welcome your views. Please send your contributions as soon as possible to [Central-Services-Team@dwpgsi.gov.uk](mailto:Central-Services-Team@dwpgsi.gov.uk)

Alternatively, you can call me, Robert Sneddon, on ☎ 0207 449 5410 to discuss potential articles.

I look forward to hearing from you.

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

## HBINFO conference

HBINFO is the largest independent website for administrators involved in HB/CTB.

Our next conference is in **Birmingham** on Monday 14 September. Highlights include:

**Professor Peter Kemp**, one of the main architects of the original LHA scheme will be presenting an evaluation based on the available research evidence. Has LHA been a success or a missed opportunity? A critical debate for the longer term future of HB administration. **Judge Edward Jacobs** will be considering the impact of Tribunal Reform (almost) one year on. **Neil Bateman** will be presenting a paper on Benefit fraud and prosecutions based on a wealth of practical experience in the Courts. Add in the inimitable **John Zebedee**, a session on HB reform and practitioners corner with **Julian Hobson** and I hope you will agree that we have a first rate agenda to offer you.

More details can be found on the front page at [www.hbinfo.org](http://www.hbinfo.org)

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

## Tackling in the Credit Crunch

The national economic downturn has caused a sustained increase in the number of people claiming and enquiring about Housing Benefits resulting in increased pressure on LAs with the DWP providing extra funding to Councils during 2009/10 to respond to this increase in demand. Capita can provide a package of training courses targeted specifically at addressing these issues and helping LAs provide a timely and accurate service to customers, many of whom will have had no previous dealings with the Social Security system.

These courses are designed not just for Benefits staff but will also help departments and organisations providing welfare advice or who are directly affected by the payment of HB/CTB. Training can therefore also be tailored for the issues faced by advice agencies and social landlords as well as other Council departments.

Courses include

- **Understanding Welfare Benefits** - using the structure of the welfare benefits system as a starting point, the course covers a wide range of topics a helps to maximise income and reduce debt by ensuring that staff are aware of the basic entitlement conditions and methods of claiming specific welfare benefits.
- **Understanding Overpayment Subsidy and Recovery** - specifically aimed at making sure that the classification and recovery of overpayments is fully understood and equipping staff with the specialist skills to minimise subsidy loss to the Council.
- **Customer Services** - queries relating to HB/CTB represent a significant proportion of the total number of a Council's customer contacts and are often the most important part of the claim process. Our courses help staff meet the needs of customers through focusing on customer care and ensuring the integrity of the process from the very outset.
- **Private Rents** – aimed at the increasing numbers of claims from people living in privately rented accommodation, this course has been designed for existing staff needing training in assessing rent allowance claims. The course covers all relevant topics including eligible rent costs, assessing private tenant claims, regulation 9 and Local Housing Allowance (LHA).

Our courses are delivered by experienced practitioners and can provide your staff with the complete set of skills and knowledge they need by using a variety of teaching methods to ensure that trainees are actively engaged throughout. Our courses can be tailored to meet the specific requirements of individual LAs and also include systems training on request.

If you would like any further details in relation to any of these courses or have an enquiry about other courses available please contact [APT@capita.co.uk](mailto:APT@capita.co.uk) or phone ☎ 020 8315 2013.

**Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to [HB-Policy-FAQ@dwpgsi.gov.uk](mailto:HB-Policy-FAQ@dwpgsi.gov.uk)**