

Housing Benefit Direct.....

August 2009

Issue 92

Editorial

It seems that the weather has taken a turn for the worse over the last couple of weeks but I hope that this won't dampen your enjoyment of the summer break too much. Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division, has himself chosen this fortnight for his annual holiday which presents others in his team with an opportunity to introduce the August edition of Housing Benefit Direct.



August is the time when Ministers traditionally take their own summer break and when officials begin their preparations to take forward new initiatives in the autumn. This year is no exception. As Paul said last month, and quite likely the month before that too, we are working hard to prepare for the launch of the Housing Benefit Green Paper which we hope to publish later this year.

Housing Benefit reform is a topic which generates huge amounts of interest and not just amongst benefits practitioners. The Review team were very pleased to be invited to the recent DWP Annual Forum where we led discussion on Housing Benefit reform at a number of the afternoon workshops. Each of the workshops, which were substantially oversubscribed, generated lively debate about the principles of Housing Benefit reform and left us in no doubt that there is a widespread mood in favour of further reform to the system. I was struck particularly by the impassioned argument for changes to the way in which supported 'exempt' accommodation is dealt with in Housing Benefit. I know that this subject was discussed in last month's HB Direct but I would like to reiterate our plea for evidence about what is actually happening so that we can make progress in this area.

Finally, Ilona Blue will be leaving her position as head of the Local Authority Performance Division and Danielle Wells will be moving on from her role as the deputy head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division. Both will be leaving at the end of the month. I know that both Ilona and Danielle have enjoyed their time working with local authorities and our other stakeholders immensely and we wish them all the best for the future.

Adrian Pateman, Housing Benefit Review Programme Team
Email: Adrian.Pateman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Paying HB direct to tenants living in temporary accommodation

We wrote in April's edition of HB direct (Issue 88) asking to hear from local authorities (LAs) who were interested in taking part in a series of trials intended to test the impact of making direct Housing Benefit (HB) payments to customers living in temporary accommodation.

More recently, our new team of DWP Ministers has, as you might expect, been considering its policy and spending priorities for the coming months. In doing so they have decided not to proceed with the direct payment trials because this project is no longer considered to be a key priority.

We would like to express our gratitude to those who did express an interest in working with us on this project, and we look forward to exploring other ways of generating more positive outcomes for this group of customers in the future.

Meanwhile, please note that detailed proposals to reform the HB subsidy arrangements for customers living in temporary accommodation have now been circulated as part of a six-week consultation with the Local Authority Associations (LAAs). A brief outline of the changes was published in *HB Direct* in June (Issue 90).

For further details contact joseph.stacey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

HB/CTB Caseload Statistics to be published

Following a successful period of quality assurance work, which included feedback on caseload statistics from individual LAs, DWP will be publishing HB and CTB National Statistics on Caseloads 19 August 2009. These will be the first set of published statistics derived directly from the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) and will update previously published National Statistics relating to caseload figures as at August 2007.

The re-instated Caseload National Statistics will cover the period November 2008 to May 2009 (inclusive) and will include breakdowns on **i** Tenancy Type, **ii** Passported Benefits, **iii** Average Entitlement and **iv** Working age/Elderly split. These statistics will also be broken down by LA and Region and will be released via the DWP website at <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbctb.asp>

New Good Practice Guide (GPG)

As highlighted in a recent general information bulletin we have undertaken a review of the Performance and Good Practice Guide (PGPG) to ensure it is up to date and relevant – thank you to those LAs who responded to our PGPG survey. As a result we have removed the old part one containing the more technical and detailed information and replaced it with an overview of the HB/CTB Performance Framework - in order to simply set the context of the good practice. This allows us to focus on the main purpose of the guide and have renamed the guide the **Good Practice Guide (GPG)** to reflect this. However, to ensure you still have access to accurate and up to date technical and detailed information we have strengthened the guide's links to other websites and resources, such as the Audit Commission's and the HB Operational Database (HoBOD).

We also continuously review the content of the good practice element to ensure its relevancy and offer you the best possible good practice we are aware of. Some recent additions include

- an efficiency checklist (this replaces the content of the Value for money website)
- details and links to available national products
- further 'take-up campaign' good practice
- 'process improvements' good practice

The revised guide can be found using the link <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/housing-benefit/performance-and-good-practice/hbctb-good-practice-guide/>

Unfortunately the print friendly facility will not be available until September 2009, due to the ongoing DWP website upgrade. In the meantime if you wish to print out any sections of the GPG you can copy and paste the relevant section into a word document and print from there.

As always we are keen to hear of any contributions from LAs who have identified good practice and want to share it more widely. So, if you have any good practice to share or have any queries on any of the above please contact us at Performance-Framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Valuation of capital assets – contract with Valuation Office Agency

The current contract between DWP and the Valuation Office Agency (VOA), which undertakes valuations of property and other capital assets commenced on 1 September 2008. Details of the revised arrangements are in *HB/CTB Circular A15/2008*.



The contract has now been in operation for nine months and we have been advised by the VOA that there are still a significant number of referral errors by LAs in the completion of valuation forms LA1 and LA2. Cost centre numbers and signatures are often being omitted. Some LAs are advising customers who are

dissatisfied with the outcome of their valuation to contact the VOA direct. As the VOA is not resourced to deal with such enquiries this should cease immediately.

Some LAs are also amending the content and layout of forms LA1 and LA2, including the wording of some of the questions. These were agreed with VOA when the contract was renegotiated and should not be altered in any way. However, we are aware that some LAs are amending the wording of questions relating to the valuation of jointly owned property; the current HB/CTB GM guidance does not take account of a Court of Appeal decision on this subject and we aim to rectify this shortly. Meanwhile, LAs are asked not to amend the wording of any of the questions on forms LA1 and LA2.

An HB/CTB circular with further details will be issued shortly. Please contact richard.metcalfe@dwp.gsi.gov.uk if you have any questions.

SHBE – success story

The first Single Housing Benefit Extracts (SHBE) were received in May 2008 transforming the way in which Information Directorate collect HB and CTB data from LAs. This modern approach to collecting data has replaced the need for two separately received data extracts.

The data is currently received from the LAs via Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) encrypted emails which is an interim measure until the Generic File Transfer System is available later this year. These initial improvements have dispensed with the need for returns to be made both clerically and via disc providing a more robust and secure data process.

By working closely with the LAs we have seen a steady increase in the receipt of SHBE data and to date have successfully loaded returns from over 98% of LAs. This is in fact, the best ever return rate the Directorate has seen and has exceeded both the clerical returns and the IAD scan. The scope of data within SHBE is extensive, covering over 340 fields providing us with our richest data source yet. To ensure the data continues to meet our high standards of quality, rigorous quality assurance checks are now in place.



Over the last few months the Data Integrity Team has been using the SHBE returns for HB data matching activities. Using a phased implementation approach, 238 out of a total of 239 LAs (99.6%) in Phase 1 have had their existing HBMS scan successfully de-commissioned. Phase 2, which contains the final 165 LAs is expected to be completed by the end of September.

The SHBE contains a wealth of data which is used for policy analysis and performance measurement against Right Time and Right Benefit Indicators. It provides caseload data for National Statistics and DWP financial planning, as well as Management information statistics which are recorded on the HoBOD.

The SHBE is without doubt a success story and a significant achievement for all those involved in its delivery.

Further information is available from LYTHAMSTANNES.IFDPEELPARKDDT@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK

Don't let your staff miss out

With the current volume of work that authorities are dealing with, training officers are often pulled in many directions away from delivering training.



The Kent Benefits Partnership was formed by the LAs in Kent, and can provide the training your staff need. Our trainers are employed by an LA, and are still involved in the real life of benefit processing.

Our methods are varied and keep staff involved. We apply principles of adult learning to ensure courses are interesting and most importantly do what they are meant to. We deal with benefit law as it works in real life, not in obscure examples.

We have received many comments on the effectiveness of the training we provide. If we don't have a course that exactly fits your needs, let us know and we can develop it for you.

Some of the courses available are:

- **Foundation** (1 week) – the perfect introduction to the world of benefits
- **Overpayments** (1 day) – get your decisions right in this subject
- **Persons from abroad** (1 day) – make the right decisions using the right reasons
- **Self-employed and students** (1 day) – Understand the law and apply it correctly on these less frequent cases
- **Welfare benefits overview** (1 day) – Give your customers advice on what else they could claim
- **Train the trainer** (2 days) – An introduction to your staff in how to train and make it fun, interesting and effective!

We will deliver training at your authority.

We also offer an assessment service for the IRRV NVQs in HB/CTB.

For more information, contact Mike Cahill (Kent Benefit Partnership manager) at

mike.cahill@kent.gov.uk or phone **0845 345 0310** between 1pm and 5pm any weekday.

SECONDMENT OPPORTUNITY - Employee Authentication Service Project

Looking for a new challenge? Then read on.

The Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme is driving an ambitious set of projects which are changing the way the Department exchanges information with LAs.

The team is working on a new project '**Employee Authentication Service**' to strengthen the level of authentication of the 22,000 LA employees who access DWP's Customer Information System to process HB/CTB. This project will involve engaging with key stakeholders and LAs.



The job

- identifying, supporting and training 300 plus LA staff to manage processes within their LA from across the UK and Northern Ireland
- helping to develop the training material and the training programme
- supporting the communications manager in developing the implementation plan
- owning the relationship with a number of LAs and supporting them through the entirety of the implementation
- supporting the project management team in developing project plans, risk registers and managing project finance

The person

- someone with a training background
- OK with regular travel across the country with occasional overnight stays
- ability to communicate confidently at all levels both verbally and in writing
- ability to work to tight deadlines
- well developed organisational skills

This is a high profile role in an exciting area of work that would provide the right individual with an excellent opportunity to develop further their experience and skills and benefit the LA on their return through having someone with

- a detailed understanding of the EAS project and associated technical and business processes
- direct insight into DWP project work, including DWP's/central government's Gated Review Process
- a wide skill-set and proven track record in delivering training packages nationwide
- lots of experience in drafting and presenting training material

Location

Negotiable for the right person, but will in any event involve regular travel across the country with occasional overnight stays. Your line manager is based in London, Caxton House.

Duration

Starting as soon as possible – and likely to last 6-9 months.

For further information please contact David Wright on ☎ 0207 449 5350 or e-mail ✉ eas.info@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Otherwise, please provide your CV by email to ✉ eas.info@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Closing date is Friday 28 August 2009

Contacting the Child Benefit Office

It has been brought to our attention that some of you have been experiencing difficulties when contacting the Child Benefit Office using the fax number published in *HB/CTB Bulletin G3/2009* and *HB Direct Issue 87*

Child Benefit Office has advised us that there was a technical problem for a couple of weeks which has now been resolved. If you do need to contact the Child Benefit Office for information about HB/CTB, the request should be made 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.



Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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

Eden Brown - recruitment and training

In Revenues and Benefits, your choice of recruitment agency can have an enormous impact on the success of your department. How do you choose from the thousands of agencies out there?

Firstly, you should establish the values you hold as an employer of choice. Talk to existing successful employees about the factors that influenced their decision to join you.



Next, find a recruitment organisation that can communicate those values to potential applicants. It's easy to be bamboozled by clever marketing and sales staff with claims that meet your goals, but there are better indicators you can look for. Perhaps look at the way the agency behaves towards their staff and the values they hold as an organisation. Family friendly agencies for example, will find it easier to reflect family friendly policies. Is your agency of choice really interested in promoting diversity if it doesn't adhere to diversity related standards like the 'two ticks'? The REC (Recruitment & Employment Confederation) has a variety of standards that Employment Agencies can subscribe to and may be a useful starting point.

Here at Eden Brown we pride ourselves on delivering the best service at the best possible price. By working in partnership with our clients we can create a pool of contractors who can be used across multiple sites, but most importantly the cost can be controlled. Having choices and a 'virtual bench' of candidates is crucial, especially within our current climate. However we can also provide you with dedicated training both for your front line staff in legislation, but perhaps more importantly for your managers. Development for your managers can be a major factor in increasing the productivity of your teams.

Choosing the right recruitment agency this way can be more time consuming than choosing the one that calls most persistently but this way, partnering with a recruitment agency that reflects your organisations values, success is a more likely outcome.

For further information please contact Heather Salway.

HR Director

Eden Brown

☎ 0207 422 7321

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The Quick Benefits Calculator

The Quick Benefits Calculator from LGBP Ltd is a comprehensive benefits calculation tool covering entitlement to the full range of means-tested benefits and tax credits.

Updated several times per year to reflect changes in benefits law, the program is used by many hundreds of organisations throughout the UK, including LAs, social landlords and the majority of Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx).

The program handles many of the more difficult scenarios, including claimant-swap better-off calculations for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) couple claims.

The program is made available on a simple subscription basis. One annual fee covers initial purchase, updates and support.

To arrange a free trial,

contact 📧 info@lissongrovebenefits.co.uk or

telephone us on ☎ 01273 711 736

Further information may be found on our website 🌐 <http://www.lissongrovebenefits.co.uk>



Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwg.gsi.gov.uk