

Housing Benefit Direct.....

January 2009

Issue 85

Editorial

Happy New Year to everyone – I hope you managed to have a good break.

As you well know, 2008 was a busy and eventful year. Whilst it might be good to think that 2009 will be less busy and eventful, I can't promise that, as I'm sure you realise! In fact, most of you will have already experienced increased workloads as a result of the economic downturn. We will undoubtedly see more Housing Benefit claims during the course of the year.



You may have seen in the Pre-Budget Report that the Chancellor announced some additional resources to ensure that the help we provide to unemployed people is maintained and if possible enhanced. The main element of this additional funding is directed at employment programmes that support people to find a new job, giving them appropriate help, for example in developing new skills. But some additional funding will go into benefit processing, recognising that we want to continue to provide a good service for those who have just lost their job.

We intend to provide some extra resource to you (additional administration grant) in recognition of the large increases in workload you are seeing. We are currently discussing the allocation of this exceptional funding with your associations and we hope to say more shortly. The idea will be to give a measure of stability to enable you to recruit more staff, even if they are short-term appointments. Our clear message is that, whilst we need to press on with further efficiencies, you may need more staff over the coming year and we hope to provide some help to enable you to recruit them. There is a further article about this inside.

Finally, I want to mention backdating. You will be aware that, in response to concerns raised in the recent consultation exercise, our Ministers decided to allow backdating, for working age customers, of six months rather than three. This decision will be reviewed and we now want to monitor the circumstances in which such backdating is used. Shelter and Citizens Advice will help with this but we would also very much welcome case studies from local authorities and their associations. If you have examples of backdating which you think may be helpful, please contact

☎ Nina.Young@dpw.gsi.gov.uk

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division

Email: ☎ Paul.Howarth@dpw.gsi.gov.uk



Changes to the distribution arrangements for HB Direct -Reminder

This item first appeared in Issue 84 of HB Direct but is being repeated as a reminder.

We have recently carried out an internal review of HB Direct and, for a variety of reasons, have decided that as of March 2009 we will no longer be issuing HB Direct as a hard copy publication.

If you currently receive HB Direct by post and need to continue to receive it after March 2009 then you will need to make sure that you submit your email address, first name, surname & name of organisation/company, to

☎ HB-Direct@cds.co.uk

As HB Direct is published on the DWP website you may want to reconsider receiving your own personal copy of the newsletter.

Further information is available from ☎ Kath.Murphy@dpw.gsi.gov.uk

Support for local authorities through the economic downturn

We are very much aware that the current economic downturn is likely to have a significant impact on the administration of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit.

Additional Resources

In the Pre-Budget Report 2008, the Chancellor announced that the Government is setting aside additional resources for DWP over the next two years, to ensure that we can continue to deliver and improve effective support services for the unemployed during the economic downturn. The expected impact of rising unemployment on HB/CTB administration was one of the many factors taken into account in agreeing the available funding.

We need to agree with Treasury the basis of any additional allocation of administration grant, but meanwhile we have started to discuss with your local authority associations how we would allocate the funding so as to respond in the best way to pressures related to HB/CTB delivery. We will let you have further information as soon as the details are finalised over the next few weeks.



Mid-year Benefit Expenditure Estimates

The Department is prepared in exceptional circumstances to reconsider the mid-year estimates for subsidy in relation to benefit expenditure submitted by local authorities. Each request will be considered on an individual basis.

If your authority wishes to request reconsideration, you should provide full supporting information which should state why the mid-year estimate is no longer sufficient to meet your needs and you will need to demonstrate a significant impact on your authority's cash flow. You should include any assumptions you have made and relevant caseload increase information with any request. This supporting information should be based on as many weeks' data as possible in order to provide the assurance that the payment of additional subsidy is fully justified.

For further details about mid-year estimate changes, please contact

✉ Michael.Mina@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

☎ 01253 33 3864

Local Authority Omnibus Survey, Reports for wave 17

The summary and final reports for Wave 17 of the Local Authority Survey will be available to download from the website in January. As in previous waves the final report will continue to be published electronically as separate sections, each available as a *.pdf file for download from the website.

Please use the following URL address, which points to the location of the wave 17 summary report page

📄 <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/summ2007-2008/556summ.pdf>

The contents for wave 17 are

Title and contents

Section A: Information

Section B: Efficiency work programme

Section C: HB information flows programme

Section D: Temporary accommodation

Section E: Closer working

Section F: Exempted supported accommodation



Further information is available from ✉ Figen.Deviren@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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

Amendments to the Rent Officers Order

From 5 January 2009, changes have been made to the way that Rent Officers determine Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA) under the Local Reference Rent (LRR) and LHA schemes. The key changes are

- Unified definition of BRMA to cover both LHA and LRR schemes. The term 'locality' has been removed and replaced with the term BRMA (LRR).
- Although we intend that 'BRMA' and 'BRMA (LRR)' boundaries should usually be the same, it was necessary to make this distinction because LHA rates are generic whilst LRR levels are case specific.
- Access to health, education, recreation, banking and shopping facilities will be given greater prominence in determining areas.
- Areas should contain a sufficient mix of residential premises so that representative LRR and LHA rates can be determined.



These changes have been made as a result of the recent House of Lords judgment in the Heffernan case. They are intended to stabilize the current situation and allow rent officers to determine areas that are broadly similar to those in effect prior to the Heffernan judgment.

Implementing the New RO Order - practical implications

Since the 5 January 2009 the geographical areas previously known as 'localities' (eg BRMA (LRR)) used for HB purposes will revert to the larger areas in use prior to the House of Lords judgment on 30 July 2008. **LAs do not need to do anything at the moment as rent officers will take all the necessary actions** but HB Departments in England and Scotland may begin to see changes to LRRs in individual case determinations as they are calculated using data from the wider areas. It should be noted that all LRRs have been updated using the most recent lettings information in readiness for this change.

There will be no immediate changes to the BRMAs and LHA information will be published on the LHA Direct website and notified to LAs as usual.

The Rent Service (TRS) in England has already published the list of the first BRMA reviews and those authorities affected will receive formal notification as early as possible. Additional reviews will be published in due course. Formal consultation will take place with LAs enabling you to respond to written proposals from TRS within a specified time period.

Rent Registration Service in Scotland has committed to reviewing all BRMAs by end September 2009. As in England full consultation will take place with LAs and the review sequence will be issued by end January 2009.

As well as the Review procedure the three national rent services will publish guidance to rent officers on the setting of BRMA boundaries.

Any enquiries about this article should be sent to 📧 Olapeju.Akanwo@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Government Connect

You will be aware of the key role played by Government Connect in the raft of projects aimed at enhancing the flow of DWP information to you.

These projects, include the electronic transfer of the Local Authority Input Document (LAID) from Jobcentre Plus, the Local Authority Claim Information (LACI) from PDCS, and the electronic transfer of HB Data Matching Service material as well as the national roll out of the enhanced In and Out of Work processes.

The roll out for these projects will be tied in with the roll out for Government Connect. Where local authorities have agreed an "exemption" with Government Connect then roll out of our Information flows projects will only be possible once compliance with Government Connect's Code of Connection has been agreed.

We expect to include a fuller update on Government Connect in February's edition.

Further information is available from 📧 Mont.Goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



Update on LHA rates for larger properties

As notified in November 2008, LHA rates for large properties will be capped at the five bedroom rate for all new claims made on or after 06/04/2009.

We have made good progress towards ensuring that the amended regulations are in place for the changes to become effective on 6 April 2009. We are in the process of consulting on the draft amendment Regulations. We also discussed the proposals at the last POG meeting to ensure that we do all that is necessary to support you in advance of this change. We will be making changes to the LHA Guidance manual, changes to the DWP web pages, and provide all the necessary help towards rolling out this change smoothly.



We are also having a meeting with the former LHA pathfinders to discuss the new proposals, the administrative impact it will have, any changes that will be required to your IT systems, existing communications, ie leaflets, locally prepared guidance manuals, advertising, updating your websites and promotion of new changes to both the customers and the stakeholders.

The proposed changes from 6 April 2009 are that

- LHA levels will be capped at the five bedroom rate for all new claims. This effectively means that no new customers will be able to receive LHA rate for more than 5 bedrooms.
- The existing customers already in receipt of LHA rate for 6 or more bedrooms will continue to receive that rate until the anniversary of their claim after which their claim will be reviewed and benefit will be assessed according to the five bedroom rate, however, we propose there will be a 13 weeks transitional protection period at their current rate before changes are made.
- Where there is a change of address, the claim will be reviewed and an appropriate five bedroom LHA rate of the new property will become applicable.
- Existing transitional protection arrangements will continue for customers where there is a death in their family.

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Strategy and Engagement Team

Housing Benefit Strategy

IRRV Benefits and Benefits Fraud Conference - Come and see us!!!



We are pleased to let you know that DWP will once again be attending the IRRV Benefits and Benefits Fraud conference at the Southport Convention Centre, Southport from 10 February to 12 February 2009.

DWP representatives will include colleagues from The Pension Service, Housing Benefit Data Matching Service, the Fraud and Error Policy team and the Performance and Development Team – and this time we can be found all together on stands 7, 8 and 9.

We will give you more information and details about our areas of focus in the next edition of HB Direct, but in the mean time, we can tell you that the Fraud and Error Policy team will be featuring LAs who we have worked closely with on a number of projects.

If you are planning to attend – do make sure you come and see us on the DWP stands.



Tackling Child Poverty

The Government's new Take Up Taskforce is asking local authorities and their partners to show how they can tackle child poverty by supporting parents to take up tax credits and benefits.

This Taskforce is looking for examples of good practice which demonstrate how local services have supported families at risk of poverty to take up the financial support they are entitled to.

The taskforce is looking specifically for work undertaken in the last three years, which

- looks to increase the take up of tax credits and benefits, and support families to manage their claims
- aligns increasing take up with wider efforts to increase parents' aspirations and help them understand the benefits of work
- demonstrates good value for money, and can be replicated within mainstream budgets
- reach families in innovative ways
- focus on families with children who are at risk of poverty

We would welcome it if you could also answer the following questions

- what are the key characteristics of your local area?
- what barriers or issues did you aim to address?
- were there any specific groups or families that were targeted?
- what exactly was done? (Please try and explain both what was changed at an organisational level, and the changes experienced by families)
- how much did it cost and how was it funded?
- which organisations were involved?
- what impact did it have?
- what are the key lessons that you have learned.

If you or your partners have good practice that you wish to share, please email amy.jones@childpovertyunit.gsi.gov.uk by 20 February 2009, outlining the details of the work done, and the impact it has had. Please include your name, title, email address and phone number, so that the Taskforce can contact you if more detail is required.

Your views, comments and suggestions for *HB Direct*

The purpose of *HB Direct* is to tell you about future developments within HB and we would welcome your views on the format and content of the newsletter.



You may have comments or suggestions for future editions – or you may even have a question you want to ask us!

Please send your ideas or questions to Kath Murphy at Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Secondment opportunity - In and Out of Work Project

Looking to do something new in 2009? Then read on.

The in and out of work project team is currently delivering national roll out of the in and out of work processes. We are looking for a proactive, positive individual who has a good working knowledge of Housing Benefit processes and the interfaces with Jobcentre Plus to join our team on secondment. The applicant should be someone who is flexible, adaptable and prepared to fully integrate into our Project Team (and that means being asked to pick up a variety of work), but primarily the focus would be in the following areas.



- Developing relationships across DWP/HMRC and LAs to facilitate the successful roll out and ensure project objectives are met.
- Representing LA interests and bringing knowledge to the table on implementation issues, planning requirements, processes etc.
- Stakeholder management including LA Chief Executives and other LA stakeholders.
- Providing practical help and support in the development of products during national roll out.
- Support the Project Manager to develop solutions and resolve issues and risks.
- Developing communication products specifically aimed at LA audiences.

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. Having the right credentials and background experience is more important to us than current grade or position.

Location

Preferably Leeds but negotiable for the right person (will include some travel and occasional overnight stays).

Duration

Starting as soon as possible – and likely to last 9 -12 months.

For further information please contact Steve Dunn on ☎ 0113 2327690 or Stuart Walton on ☎ 0113 2324117

For more information on the project you can visit

📄 www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/working-with-dwp/processes.asp

Otherwise, please provide your CV by email to Steve Dunn ✉ steve.dunn@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk

Closing Date is Friday 23 January 2009

