

Housing Benefit Direct.....

February 2009

Issue 86

Editorial

I hope you have all now seen circular S2/2009 about the economic downturn and the extra funding that we will be putting in place for you.



We certainly recognise that workloads are increasing and that this is likely to continue for some time. When speaking to some of you recently, I have said that we need to look closely at any measures we can come up with to help in this situation. There may be changes to processes that we can put in place, perhaps on a temporary basis that will be helpful. We need to bear in mind that many of the customers we are now dealing with will not have experienced the benefit system before, so we have more of a task to help them navigate through it. And we will need to do all we can to maintain good effective joint working. Jobcentre Plus is of course dealing with very high volumes of work and it will be more important than ever to maintain good contacts at this time.

It was good to see some of you at the recent *hbinfo* conference in London, and then at a meeting of the West Midlands Mets Group. As ever, there was a good deal of lively debate both about current issues such as LHA, exempt accommodation and backdating, and also about the scope for reform and the next stage of our review programme. I am very grateful for your candid and comprehensive feedback. Discussions like this can often trigger ideas we can work up.

We have this week rectified a potential error in the uprating order concerning invalidity additions for those receiving State Pension. We will let you have further details this week but we understand that most of you will not have started uprating yet, or will have arrived at the right outcome anyway. So, just something to watch out for.

Finally, I hope to see some of you at the IRRV benefits conference next week.

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

Access to Government Connect



Is your authority engaged and working towards Code of Connection compliance? If so then it can expect the full support of DWP in meeting the swap over to GCSx. If you are unsure what actions you should be taking to get compliant or have any questions on when you are going live, then we urge you to contact Government Connect as soon as possible and work out a joint plan.

DWP want you to have continued access to CIS and exchange sensitive data, but the new Data Access policy means that this could be at risk unless you have an agreed plan with Government Connect to complete the outstanding compliancy actions. The key next step for authorities that have not recently agreed a plan is to contact Anna Smith, the Government Connect Implementation Manager.

The Government Connect Implementation Team recently restructured in order to provide maximum support in achieving Code of Connection compliance. HB managers may wish to confirm with their IT leads they have recently agreed a set of actions with the Government Connect implementation team and are ready to connect to GCSx on the agreed date.

For more information go to the Government Connect website <http://www.govconnect.gov.uk/>. Anna Smith, Government Connect Implementation Manager can be contacted at Anna.Smith3@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Welfare Reform Agenda: A fresh look - Update

The internal HB review, jointly taken forward by DWP and HM Treasury (HMT), began in April last year and reported to Ministers at the end of December 2008. As part of the Welfare Reform White Paper, *'Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future'* published in December, we provided a formal update on the review outlining our next steps and key issues we would like to address.

These include the need to ensure that the HB system supports the wider welfare system in

- helping people move into work
- delivering value for money for the tax payer, and
- ensuring the HB system is fair to working families not on benefits

In the Welfare Reform White Paper, we also announced our intention to launch a public consultation on HB reform early in 2009, a process which will begin with the publication of the HB reform consultation document. Here we will look to set out the long term vision for HB reform and a potential strategy for achieving our objectives, including value for money, whilst setting out any early steps we may need to take.



In the lead up to the consultation, and during the 12 week consultation period, we will be setting up a combination of national events, stakeholder specific round tables and workshops so that we can hear your views on the future for HB reform.

For more information see

- *More Direct, October 2008*
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/user-communications/hb-direct-newsletter/2008/moredirectOct08.pdf>
- Welfare Reform White Paper, *'Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future'* published in December <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/raisingexpectations/fullversion.pdf>

or email Angelina Cannizzaro Angelina.Cannizzaro@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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

In last month's edition, we said we would give you some more information and details about our areas of focus for the stand at the IRRV Benefits and Benefits Fraud Conference.

On the stand throughout the conference we will have representation from teams such as

- the In and Out of Work Project
- Government Connect
- Housing Benefit Data Matching Service, and
- PDCS HB Liaison

The Fraud and Error Policy team and the Performance Development Team will also be attending. Their focus will be on projects that they have worked on over the past two years to assist you with tackling the causes of fraud and error.

We will be able to provide you with our Information Brochure which gives a snapshot of all of the key activities currently underway within our policy areas. This will include an update giving the latest position regarding Single HB Extract (SHBE)

Staff from Derwentside DC and Birmingham City Council are piloting Voice Risk Analysis, and Bury MBC who have been piloting work with a credit reference agency have been invited to support us at the conference. They will be available to tell you about their experience working on these projects.

Also available will be Simon Lunn from the Housing Research and Analytical Division who will be demonstrating the Right Benefit Toolkit tracking template, designed to help you plan and monitor your progress against the right benefit indicator.

You can find us all together on stands 7, 8 and 9.

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



Council Tax Benefit take-up



As April approaches and it is time for Council Tax bills to start going out, we want to take the opportunity to promote Council Tax Benefit (CTB) once again. We are looking at how we can best promote CTB to our customers, who may be missing out on reduced bills and we know that you will also be looking at how you can do this.

As a number of you have requested, we will again make flyers and posters available for you to use to promote CTB. In previous years many LAs have included the flyer in council tax bills and displayed the poster in council offices as they are simple and effective ways to raise awareness of the benefit among customers.

In a change from previous years, the updated publicity material now includes the 'DirectGov' web address, rather than DWP's, as the place for customers to get more information. Please ensure that the latest versions are used as products from previous years are now out of date.

Details of the campaign, including copies of the flyers and posters for you to download, are on the internet at www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/counciltax/

We have also made Quark files available so that you can include your own logo if required.

If you would like any further information, please email Duncan Macgregor in DWP Communications, email duncan.macgregor@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Changes to State Pension age for women – direct mailing to women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1955

As you will already be aware, the State Pension age for women will increase gradually from 60 to 65 between 2010 and 2020, so that it is equalised with that of men. DWP will be writing to women who are affected by this gradual increase and in a previous edition of 'HB Direct' we promised to provide more information about this mailshot.

As a reminder, the gradual increase in State Pension age affects all women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1955. It will be phased in over ten years, with women's State pension age rising by one month every two months between 2010 and 2020. All women born in the same month of the relevant year (between the 6th of the month and the 5th of the following month) will reach State Pension age on the same date. Women born on or after 6 April 1955 will have the same State Pension age as men.



From April 2009, we will start writing to women affected by this gradual increase, telling each woman the date she will reach State Pension age. We will send out letters every three months, over a period of three years. The last letters will be sent out in January 2012. We will write to women in the order of their date of birth – so those women who reach State Pension age first will be contacted first. All women will be sent a letter well before their 60th birthday.

Included with the letter will be a leaflet: *State Pension changes and what they mean for you*. This gives other useful information about the main changes to State Pensions, as well as answering some frequently asked questions. It also 'signposts' women to other useful sources of information about the changes.

We have put in place arrangements to handle calls from women who contact us directly about changes to their State Pension age.

More information about the changes to State Pensions is on our website www.thepensionservice.gov.uk. For more information about the direct mailing to women affected by the phased increase in State Pension age contact Elizabeth Ruffley Elizabeth.Ruffley@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

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