

# Local Housing Allowance reforms 2011: good practice

Findings and lessons learned from visits to local authorities

November 2011

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# Introduction

- 1 We have been visiting local authorities (LAs) to find out more about the potential impact of the changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), announced in the June 2010 budget. The changes to LHA are detailed in circular A25/2010: [www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a25-2010.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a25-2010.pdf)
- 2 Although not just a change to LHA, we have also been talking to LAs about changes to the shared accommodation rate for under-35 year olds. These changes are detailed in circulars A6/2011 ([www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a6-2011.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a6-2011.pdf)) and A12/2011([www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a12-2011.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/a12-2011.pdf))
- 3 In December 2010 we sent LAs a toolkit which included letter, leaflet, and poster templates, and a task sheet. Through our visits we have found LAs using this toolkit, and also coming up with numerous examples of their own good practice, which we have summarised in this document.
- 4 The purpose of this document is to share the good practice we have found. It is not intended to reflect actions the DWP necessarily recommends, but instead to promote ideas and discussion in LAs when devising ways to deal with the changes.
- 5 We have organised the examples of good practice in to four areas:
  - Communicating with claimants
  - Using Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to deal with the reforms
  - Working with landlords
  - Working with housing teams and other stakeholders
- 6 Listed over the forthcoming pages are examples of the good practice we have found when visiting LAs.
- 7 For more information about the good practice in this document, please contact the Private Rented Sector and Council Tax Benefit team: [Eugene.Okonkwo@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Eugene.Okonkwo@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

## Communicating with claimants

- 8 LAs see it as important to tell customers about the LHA changes, so they can plan ahead and make informed choices about their housing. By the time of writing this document, LAs have already completed their first communications on the changes, so the examples below focus on work LAs are doing as we get to January 2012 and beyond.

### Written communications

- 9 Putting claimants in to groups, depending on how they are affected by the reforms, and writing different letters to different groups. For example, customers losing the up to £15 excess, customers affected by the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile calculation, customers who lose the 5-bedroom rate, or combinations of these.
- 10 Writing different letters depending on how groups of customers are affected by the shared accommodation restriction for under-35 year olds. For example, customers with or without transitional protection, customers on LHA, or customers whose benefit will change at their next rent officer referral.
- 11 Many LAs found the response to initial communications, through telephone calls and reception visits, was less than expected. LAs are worried that customers do not see a drop in HB as a pressing concern, and are not taking appropriate action. Many LAs have decided to write to customers again, about two months before transitional protection is due to end.
- 12 Letters will often sign-post to other sources of support, including Housing Options, Shelter, CAB, and other housing or money advice organisations.
- 13 Using the DWP poster, leaflet and letter templates. Some LAs are also using products from organisations such as the National Homelessness Advice Service ([www.nhas.org.uk](http://www.nhas.org.uk)) and Shelter ([www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)).
- 14 One LA has produced a letter which claimants can give to their landlords to help with rent negotiations. A template, based on this letter, is in [appendix 1](#).
- 15 One LA has designed a pro-forma to help claimants negotiate rent reductions with their landlord.

### Telephone and face-to-face communications

- 16 Using data to identify the customers potentially worst affected by the changes (for example, those who will see the biggest reductions in HB, or vulnerable groups), and either telephoning or visiting customers. This work is often done jointly with housing options teams.

- 17 LAs that are visiting customers affected by the changes are also using this as an opportunity to check for changes in circumstances and potential fraud.
- 18 One LA is planning to telephone all its 400 customers affected by the under-35 shared accommodation change.
- 19 Many LAs found it difficult to attract sizeable numbers of claimants to events such as forums, open days, and drop-in surgeries. One LA had success by booking a venue in a busy shopping area, and employing staff to invite customers in from the street. Another LA received their highest attendance when they had a stand at a local supermarket.
- 20 Volunteering for interviews on local radio stations about the changes. One LA has targeted local stations with audiences from different ethnic groups.
- 21 Through training, encouraging front-line staff to look out for customers potentially affected by the changes. The staff are trained on giving appropriate advice or to sign-post to other departments or organisations that can help.

## **Electronic communications**

- 22 Working with corporate communications or marketing teams on their communication strategy.
- 23 LAs are making efforts to record customer's email addresses. They are creating mailing lists where they can send updates on the reforms and reminders to customers.
- 24 Using text messaging to remind customers of key events (for example, when transitional protection is close to running out).
- 25 Speaking to corporate web teams, to get information about the HB changes prominently displayed on their website.
- 26 Using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to tell customers about the HB changes.

## Using Discretionary Housing Payments to deal with the reforms

- 27 There has been an increase to DHP funding from 2011–12, and LAs expect a greater demand on DHP budgets from January 2012. The greater demand is likely to happen when transitional protection from the LHA changes starts to run out, and when customers aged 25 to 34 will start being affected by the changes to the shared accommodation rate.
- 28 In light of these changes, many LAs are changing their approach to DHPs. The examples below are intended to complement the DHP Good Practice Guide already produced by the Department, available at:  
[www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dhpguide.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dhpguide.pdf)

### Profiling caseload and budgeting

- 29 In order to budget DHPs to deal with the impact of the HB reforms, LAs are identifying the number of customers affected, the number of claims with transitional protection ending each month, and the individual levels of entitlement reduction.
- 30 Profiling caseloads to identify vulnerable groups who could be more adversely affected if they move, so they can be pro-actively targeted for DHPs. One LA contacted many of its stakeholders that deal with vulnerable people to try and identify groups they may not hold information about on their own systems (subject to data protection).
- 31 Some analysis of equality impacts may help target support through DHPs. For example, some LAs have produced their own equality impact assessment. For example:  
[www.leicester.gov.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=75321&type=full&servicetype=Attachment](http://www.leicester.gov.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=75321&type=full&servicetype=Attachment))
- 32 Identifying the potential amount of LA contribution that may be needed as a contingency arrangement if profiling indicates potential spending over the government contribution.
- 33 In order to inform on future policy, LAs are tracking progress of previous DHP awards. For example, they are looking at how many customers awarded or refused a DHP actually stayed in their home.
- 34 Re-visiting previous DHP applications to identify customers who could get the extra bedroom rate for a non-residential carer.
- 35 Using DWP analysis to help inform their DHP policy:  
[www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/impacts-of-hb-proposals.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/impacts-of-hb-proposals.pdf)

## Approach to DHP awards

- 36 When considering the amount they usually award, LAs are re-visiting the amounts they consider 'reasonable' expenses. One LA was previously topping up to full rent levels, but is now doing more 'break even' calculations (i.e. using a DHP to top up income to the same level as out-goings).
- 37 Reconsidering where DHP spending is prioritised, and in some cases having to compromise previous objectives. For example, some LAs previously used DHPs to ease the transition in to work, but may reconsider this if there is a bigger demand on preventing homelessness.
- 38 Reconsidering the length of awards (for example, awarding for four months instead of six months). When doing this, LAs are focusing more on getting money advice to customers, to prevent 'renewal' applications. They are also linking the length of awards to events such as a birthday or the end of the school year. In some cases, LAs are trying to 'wean' customers from their dependence to DHPs by reducing the amount each fortnight (for example, £20 the first fortnight, £15 the second, £10 the third, etc). Longer term awards may still, however, be appropriate in some circumstances.
- 39 Re-designing their DHP application forms to reflect their new approach or policy.
- 40 Considering giving DHP decisions in advance of HB dropping, so claimants have time to make informed choices about their housing options.
- 41 Using DHPs to help for short transitional periods. For example, customers restricted to the shared accommodation rate a few months before their 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, or customers who have lost their exemption because they are no longer subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA).
- 42 Setting aside part of their DHP budget to deal specifically with customers affected by the changes. Others have given part of the budget to Housing, Citizens Advice (CAB), or local charity or voluntary organisations.

## Controlling spending through early intervention

- 43 Many LAs are finding that, by giving the right advice or information at the right time, and by exploring all options available to the customer, they are reducing the amount of DHP they need to award.
- 44 By focusing resources on communicating the changes effectively, many LAs are finding customers are making the right choices about the accommodation they can afford. This has reduced some of the demand on DHPs.
- 45 LAs that provide a face-to-face service when dealing with HB claims find staff can give the right advice at the first point of contact. This helps claimants make better

choices. In some cases they are negotiating with landlords from the outset of new claim applications. This will often prevent the need for future DHP applications.

- 46 Reducing double-handling and reworking in processes by having the same officer deal with all aspects of the claim, rather than passing DHP applications to specialist teams.
- 47 Being proactive in negotiations with landlords before awarding a DHP has helped reduce or even eliminate the award. Many LAs use colleagues in Housing Options to help with negotiations. One LA found many claimants are unskilled in negotiations, so when they receive DHP applications they offer to contact the landlord on the claimant's behalf.
- 48 Upon receipt of a DHP application, one LA invites customers to their offices so they can interview jointly with Housing Options. They have a holistic approach to advice about money, debt, benefits, and housing.
- 49 Cross-referencing all cases affected by the under-35 shared accommodation change with CIS, to check for entitlement to a severe disability premium. LAs have had some success with this, particularly in 'passported' cases where previously entitlement to DLA would not have affected HB entitlement.
- 50 Before awarding a DHP, one LA requires staff to complete a checklist making sure appropriate action has been taken (for example, negotiations have been attempted, benefit income has been maximised, the customer has been referred for debt advice or housing advice, etc).

## **Working with others to use DHPs effectively**

- 51 LAs are finding various internal and external partners that can help with effective DHP spending. In particular, many LAs are now working more closely with Housing Options and Advice teams because of the recent HB changes.
- 52 Benefits teams are providing training to Housing Options and other stakeholders on the DHP policy. This can also include training on legislation that negates the need for DHPs (for example, 13-week protection, and customers exempt from shared accommodation restrictions).
- 53 Reducing unnecessary spending on DHPs by using partners to help with rent negotiations (for example, Housing Options), and money advice (for example, CAB). In these cases LAs are setting up referral systems.
- 54 To reciprocate, benefits teams are often fast-tracking or prioritising DHP requests that come through their partners and stakeholders.
- 55 Upon receiving DHP applications LAs are referring customers to partners such as CAB or welfare rights teams for 'benefit maximisation', debt counselling, or money

advice. By helping customers manage their money it reduces the likelihood of 'renewal' DHPs.

- 56 Including a representative of Housing Options on the panel dealing with internal DHP disputes. Benefit teams find input from a housing or homelessness perspective can help inform decision making.
- 57 Some LAs are looking into pooling its DHP with other grants and budgets (for example, some Housing departments have received funding to deal with the changes). This can lead to more holistic financial support in a variety of areas, including housing.
- 58 Large proportions of DHP budgets are often spent helping pregnant mothers aged under-25 until they have their first child. Some Housing teams have agreed to place customers in one-bedroom (as opposed to two-bedroom) properties in these cases, which reduced the amount of DHP needed.
- 59 Considering using DHPs to assist with rent deposits and other costs related to moving home. This can compliment existing rent deposit or bond schemes used by homelessness and private sector lettings teams.
- 60 LAs that have previously spent less than the government's contribution are working with Housing Options and other stakeholders to identify where DHPs can be most effectively used.

## Working with landlords

- 61 With a less generous HB scheme it is important LAs engage with landlords in order to keep sufficient levels of private sector housing 'stock'. Effective engagement with landlords can also help reduce evictions, improve property standards, ensure tenants are treated fairly and lawfully, and help benefit teams to process claims. Many Benefits teams work with their Housing colleagues to engage with landlords.
- 62 There is general information about working effectively with landlords in the HB/CTB good practice guide: [www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/housing-benefit/performance-and-good-practice/hbctb-good-practice-guide/part-one-good-practice/working-with-other/#workingeffectively](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/housing-benefit/performance-and-good-practice/hbctb-good-practice-guide/part-one-good-practice/working-with-other/#workingeffectively)

### Landlord forums

- 63 To make forums more attractive to landlords, Benefit teams are inviting other speakers (for example from planning, environmental health, landlord associations, debt recovery teams, etc).
- 64 Sending forum details and agendas with their landlord notification letters.
- 65 Most LAs have held landlord forums. LAs that cover smaller geographical areas have held forums jointly with their neighbours. They find this leads to a larger attendance, and many landlords have properties in more than one area.
- 66 Giving contact details out at landlord forums to deal with follow-up questions. In some cases they have formed smaller working groups from the landlords that make contact. LAs find this a useful consultation exercise (for example, on the safeguard policy) and will help predict how landlords will react to the HB reforms.

### Other communications with landlords

- 67 Amassing landlord email addresses. They are finding email a cheaper and easier way to communicate with landlords. For example, they are emailing invites to forums, or regular updates on performance and welfare changes. LAs that already email payment schedules tended to have a bigger list of landlords' email addresses.
- 68 LAs often feel their communications are restricted only to landlords they currently pay HB to (for example, when sending invites to forums or writing about welfare reforms). Some LAs have kept lists of landlords they have previously paid, or obtained landlord details from colleagues in Housing Options.

69 On their communications, LAs are highlighting the potential benefits of a direct payment if landlords reduce rents to affordable levels.

70 Including a paragraph about the LHA changes on landlord notification letters.

## **Engagement and consultation with landlords**

71 LAs who run an accreditation scheme often talk to participating landlords for consultation and feedback.

72 Inviting landlords to one-to-one meetings about the changes. Targeting landlords who hold large property portfolios, letting agents, or landlords who regularly contact the service. The meetings are often held jointly with Housing Options. LAs are using these meetings to encourage landlords to carry on letting to tenants on HB, and to gain insight in to landlord's potential actions.

73 Some LAs have landlord associations active in their area. For example, the National Landlords Association ([www.landlords.org.uk](http://www.landlords.org.uk)) and the Residential Landlords Association ([www.rla.org.uk](http://www.rla.org.uk)). Representatives from the associations will often talk at LA forums, or LA representatives are invited to talk at association forums and meetings. The associations can forward communications from the LA to their landlords. LAs are finding it a useful consultative exercise to hold meetings with association representatives.

74 Having staff (or teams) with a specific role of liaising with landlords. Landlords are given direct telephone numbers and email addresses, to avoid coming through call centres. Some LAs issue new landlords with 'welcome packs'.

75 Officers are making enquiries with landlords about the potential to let properties as shared accommodation.

76 When initially paying landlords direct, some LAs ask landlords to sign a document where they agree to seek mediation or advice from the Council's Housing Advice team before issuing any notice to quit for rent arrears.

77 Telephoning landlords whose adverts insist on 'no DSS'. This helps to find out why landlords make the stipulation in the adverts, to explain the facts, and encourage them to let to tenants on HB.

78 One LA is encouraging landlords to set tenancy renewal dates to match LHA anniversary dates, which helps avoid temporary rent shortfalls.

## Working with housing teams and other stakeholders

79 While benefit teams have an important role in administering the welfare reforms, and dealing with customer enquiries; it is important to remember there could be a big impact on their stakeholders. Many LAs are finding they can achieve more working on the reforms together with partners than they could on their own. LAs are finding working on the reforms with housing teams and other stakeholders is having positive outcomes for all parties.

### Working with housing teams

80 Benefits and housing teams are setting up regular meetings specifically to deal with HB reforms. Many LAs are setting up project teams involving staff from both teams.

81 Cross-training one another, to prepare for the impact of the reforms. For example, Benefit teams are training their colleagues in Housing on the changes to HB, and Housing teams are training their colleagues in benefits on the support and advice available for affected customers.

82 Jointly visiting customers who will see reductions in HB. This allows the benefit claim to be dealt with at the same time as advising the customer about the options available to them. Housing teams normally advocate early advice in order to prevent potential homelessness or future housing problems.

83 Holding joint team meetings, or have a representative from each team at each others meetings.

84 Setting up systems for benefit teams to refer customers to Housing Options.

85 Many benefit teams are working with housing teams when reviewing their DHP and safeguard policies. They are finding better 'buy-in' to the policy from all parties, and a more consistent approach. All parties involved are clear on the objectives and priorities. They have discussed application form design and whether to use DHPs for moving costs. Benefit teams are finding better quality DHP and safeguard applications coming from Housing, with all the necessary evidence. Housing are more aware of which scenarios are realistically going mean a successful DHP or safeguard application.

86 Empowering housing teams to make safeguard decisions. This removes double-handling, and allows Housing teams to give tenants and landlords an immediate decision on HB payment. It also helps Housing teams use direct payments to negotiate affordable rents.

87 Fast-tracking DHP and safeguard requests that come from Housing.

- 88 Consulting Housing on the design of letters and other communications. The communication materials will often signpost or include a contact details for Housing Options.
- 89 Sending leaflets or information sheets about the Housing Options service to customers potentially affected by the changes.
- 90 Working together on landlord forums.
- 91 Employing a liaison officer between benefits and Housing. This officer is often available to deal with enquiries between departments and fast-tracks claims.
- 92 Some housing teams are using government funding to pay for a benefit officer to be seconded to their team.
- 93 Working with Housing Options teams to proactively contact customers with the biggest reductions in HB or vulnerable customers.
- 94 Working with Housing Options colleagues to identify customers aged 25 to 34 who could be exempt from the shared accommodation restriction because they have stayed in a hostel or are a MAPPA ex-offender.
- 95 Working with Housing Options colleagues to identify customers who could be eligible for an extra bedroom rate for a non-residential carer.

## **Working with other stakeholders**

- 96 As well as Housing, LAs are finding a number of other stakeholders that will be affected by the reforms, and who share a common purpose with the benefits team.
- 97 LAs are finding it important to identify all potential stakeholders, both internal and external, that could be affected by the reforms. In [appendix 2](#) we have listed some of the organisations LAs have contacted.
- 98 Meeting regularly with key stakeholders such as CAB. Some benefits teams are holding their own regular stakeholder liaison meetings, which are attended by various groups.
- 99 Attending various meetings, network groups, and forums held by stakeholder groups, including voluntary and charity organisations. For example, homelessness forums, anti-poverty groups, disability groups, registered provider forums, financial and social inclusion, care providers, adult and child social services, drug and alcohol, and groups representing different ethnic minorities.
- 100 Setting up council wide working parties that deal with HB and other welfare reforms. These parties will often include other departments and stakeholders, and

sometimes councillors. This aids communication and allows a joined up council strategy (linked with other strategies, such as housing and anti-poverty) to deal with the reforms.

- 101 Employing a stakeholder liaison officer, whose role involves communicating the changes and being the first point of contact for enquires.
- 102 Talking to hostels about the implications of the shared accommodation restriction for under-35 year olds. These meetings are also helping to identify ex-hostel dwellers who could be exempt from this restriction.
- 103 Providing briefing sessions and training to various stakeholder groups.
- 104 Giving leaflets to stakeholders to give out (for example, day centres, doctors' surgeries, or meals on wheels).
- 105 Some LAs are working with stakeholders to help customers into work, and are setting up work clubs. Examples are discussed at [www.nationalworkclubs.net](http://www.nationalworkclubs.net)
- 106 Councillors, chief executives, and local MPs may receive enquiries about the reforms. LAs are making sure all these parties are well briefed.
- 107 Passing details to councillors of the number of customers potentially affected in each ward each month.
- 108 Designing an e-learning course on the reforms course for internal staff in other departments.
- 109 Attending outreach surgeries arranged by other council departments.
- 110 One LA has designed an information pack to help stakeholders negotiate with landlords. The advice in the pack is tailored to different groups, including benefit advisors (for example the CAB), social landlords, private landlords, housing options advisors, and tenants.
- 111 Reading the MAPPAs reports for the LA area to obtain relevant contact details. English and Welsh reports are available at: [www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/mappa-reports/](http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/mappa-reports/) and Scottish reports at: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/public-safety/protection](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/public-safety/protection). Further guidance will be issued about customers aged 25 to 34 who could be exempt from the shared accommodation restriction but LAs will not need to identify these customers themselves.

## Appendix 1: Letter for claimants to pass to landlords

Dear Landlord,

### **Important changes to Housing Benefit (Local Housing Allowance)**

The government are making changes that will mean your tenant is likely to get less Housing Benefit.

Details of the changes are provided overleaf.

The changes will apply to all new tenants from 1 April 2011. For tenants already getting Housing Benefit the changes will happen at different times. We have written to your tenant to tell them when the change is likely to happen to them.

Because of these changes, your tenant may not get enough benefit to pay the rent in full.

We would encourage you to consider reducing your rent to a level that your tenant can afford. The advantages of doing this are:

- you will be able to retain a tenant that you know
- you will avoid having an empty property and a loss of rent for a while
- you may be able to get direct payment of Housing Benefit

If you need any more information about Housing Benefit or our direct payment policy please visit our website at [www.council.gov.uk/housingbenefit](http://www.council.gov.uk/housingbenefit), or telephone us on 0800 123456.

Yours sincerely

Ben E Fitzmanager  
Benefits Manager

## Appendix 2: List of some potential stakeholders

- Action for Blind People ([www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk](http://www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk))
- Age UK ([www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk))
- Catch-22 ([www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk))
- Centrapoint ([www.centrapoint.org.uk](http://www.centrapoint.org.uk))
- Children, schools, and families department
- Citizens Advice ([www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk))
- Councillors and MPs for the area
- Credit Unions ([www.abcul.org.uk](http://www.abcul.org.uk))
- Crisis ([www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk))
- Day centres
- Disability Information and Advice Line UK ([www.dialuk.info](http://www.dialuk.info))
- Drug and Alcohol teams
- Emmaus ([www.emmaus.org.uk](http://www.emmaus.org.uk))
- Financial inclusions groups
- Gingerbread ([www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk))
- Hostels, including the YMCA
- Housing and Homelessness teams
- Housing Associations and other social landlords
- LA Chief Executives
- Landlord associations
- Law or advocacy centres
- Letting agents
- Local schools
- Meals on Wheels
- Mediation services
- MIND ([www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk))
- Money Advice Service ([www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk](http://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk))
- National Workclubs Network ([www.nationalworkclubs.net](http://www.nationalworkclubs.net))
- Police officers dealing with MAPPA cases
- Private sector landlords and letting agents
- Probation service or youth offending service
- Refugee Council ([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk))
- Royal British Legion ([www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk))
- Royal National Institute of Blind people ([www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk))
- RSL meetings are often attended by various advice, voluntary, or charity groups
- Scope ([www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk))
- Shelter ([www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk))
- Social Services teams (Adult Social Care, Childrens Services)
- St Mungos ([www.stmungos.org](http://www.stmungos.org))
- Supporting People funded schemes
- Tenants rights groups
- University lettings agencies
- Welfare rights groups