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Editor's comment

Welcome to this edition of **moredirect** – the DWP magazine for local authority staff working in Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit administration.

We are always keen to feature stories showing innovative and creative solutions which improve HB/CTB administration, and in this issue we're pleased to include a number of articles from local authorities around **best practice**.

Our cover story features Colin Masters from Stockport and his team, who share their experiences of meeting the challenge of work-life balance. On pages 8–9 Caroline Hopkins describes how the East Riding of Yorkshire has transformed the way benefits are delivered by processing claims from the comfort of a customer's home. The advantages of closer working are demonstrated by North Lincolnshire's Christine Dyer on pages 12–13.

This is my first edition as editor and I would welcome any feedback that you may have on the magazine. I would also be grateful for any suggestions for articles that you would like to appear in future editions. You can email your ideas to: Central-Services-Team@dwp.gsi.gov.uk. Alternatively you can phone me on 0207 712 2568 if you wish to discuss potential articles.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Robert Sneddon



I am delighted to introduce this edition of **moredirect** which has the theme of **best practice**.

Adam Sharples, Director General, Work, Welfare and Equality Group

I have been impressed by the commitment on all sides to look for good practice and apply it through innovation and intelligent use of technology.

Ultimately this is about delivering a better result for both the customer and the taxpayer – getting the right money quickly and accurately to the right people, while keeping costs as low as possible. This means we have to see the system as a whole and streamline links between different benefits, collecting only information we need and only collecting it once.

This will be a challenging year for us with policy change and a tight financial envelope, but as long as we remain committed to effective partnership working I am confident that we can continue building on success.

Better and easier access to data

The first quarterly Stats 121/122 returns were produced in February using data from the HBSD/IAD scan. These join the annual 116/123 returns and Local Housing Allowance Pathfinder Returns to increase the portfolio of data now collected via this scan.

Stats 121/122 data from more and more LAs is being collected this way as the roll-out progresses and the required criteria are met. To meet these criteria, in addition to returning regular HBSD/IAD scan data using the current specification, the data should be comparable to the clerical return.

Evaluation of this data is a continuous process. Where discrepancies are identified between the information received on the scan and that received from the clerical returns, we will get in touch to understand and resolve the concern before switch off is agreed.

Changes to the way data is collected will make life easier for staff at local authorities (LAs) and the DWP.

Additional questions are being added to the scan specification from April. So as the year progresses, we expect to announce the switch off of more of the clerical returns.

For the first time, data is being delivered at a claimant level. Analysis can link up separate activities to the same claimant, giving a much better understanding of the factors influencing LA performance and the effectiveness of current policy. This will enable more effective targeting of limited resources in the future.

? To learn more ...
For more information contact hbsdiad-scan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Work-life balance

Everyone has a life and responsibilities outside of work. We have children or other caring responsibilities or want to pursue other interests. Work-life balance (WLB) is about helping people to better manage the demands of their working and personal lives to their own benefit and that of their employer.

Over the past few years Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) has introduced a wide range of WLB options into Revenues and Benefits. It is the only service area within the authority that operates an extended flexi scheme which involves removing core hours.

Revenues and Benefits is very flexible in its approach to part-time working/job share and operates many different working patterns to suit personal needs, including compressed hours and term-time working. It also advises other directorates and other local authorities (LAs) wanting to introduce similar schemes.

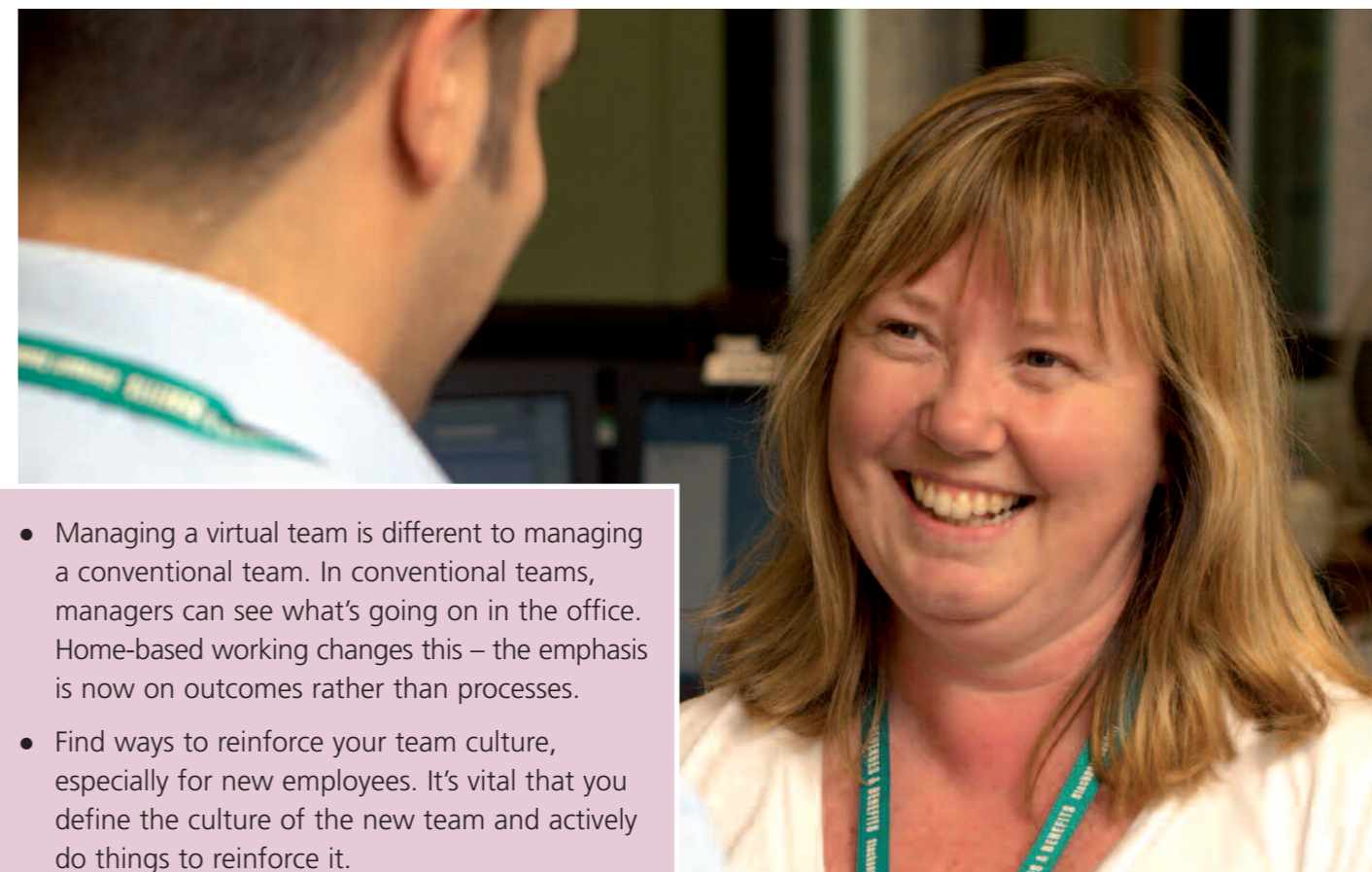
Homeworking

Revenues and Benefits was the first service area within Stockport MBC to trial homeworking. The team has 25 staff out of about 110 employees working from home, most of them full-time with managers and team leaders working from home ad hoc. Stockport Benefits Processing Manager Colin Masters said, "There is a lot of trust involved and we do not do anything different in the way of monitoring or contacting homeworkers than we do with office-based staff. The move to homeworking is our biggest change over the past few years".

Homeworking can be used for a variety of circumstances from ad hoc or occasional working at home to homeworking permanently. Many issues need to be considered for homeworking to be effective, such as work monitoring, insurance, training and development, health and safety and avoiding isolation from the normal social interaction of the work environment.

Key points to consider

- Involve people from the start. How will it affect them and what do they think about it?
- Sell the concept effectively and consider how you communicate the benefits of home-based working from everyone's point of view and be careful not to alienate staff.
- Don't underestimate training needs. When planning the transition, complete a training needs analysis and deliver tailored training when and where required.
- Anticipate resistance and help people overcome it. It may be useful to complete audits on your team that help you to understand the issues that may influence the effectiveness of change.
- Don't underestimate the practical issues. Aside from the 'big' issues such as technology and health and safety, experience has shown that once you have made the transition to home-based working, small practical things can be some of the most frustrating, and potentially expensive, things to overcome. If a laptop has a serious malfunction and has to be fixed, or if a telephone line doesn't work properly, it can mean a team member is unable to work for a large chunk of time. As people work from home, it will be difficult to re-deploy them to another task.
- Managing a virtual team is different to managing a conventional team. In conventional teams, managers can see what's going on in the office. Home-based working changes this – the emphasis is now on outcomes rather than processes.
- Find ways to reinforce your team culture, especially for new employees. It's vital that you define the culture of the new team and actively do things to reinforce it.
- Support people proactively. One of the biggest issues for staff who work from home is the sense of isolation from the workplace. People often feel that they don't have as much influence as they used to, and that they might be overlooked when it comes to promotions and other rewards.



The transition to homeworking impacts on people and processes in every part of the business. How the change is managed is as important as the effects of the change itself. The eight key points to consider when planning to introduce home-based working are detailed in the panel.

Colin said his team, having come a long way in WLB, had decided to go for the 'Work Life Balance Investors in People Accreditation'. He said, "As we are advanced compared to other service areas and indeed other councils, we aim now to be formally recognised for our work in this area."

The WLB Investors in People Accreditation is a national standard setting a level of good practice. It helps organisations build commitment, improve quality, offer best service and give everyone more choice.

? To learn more ...

To discuss any work-life balance issues
email colin.masters@stockport.gov.uk

Ilona Blue is the new head of the Local Authority Performance Division (LAPD) in DWP. She talked to us about her job, what she wants to achieve and life outside work.



Question 1

Where were you before you came to DWP?

Before taking up this job in January I spent six years at the Treasury leading on policy areas including tackling child poverty and most recently science and innovation. Before that I was an academic, working on public health research.

Question 2

What attracted you to this job?

I wanted to return to the Government's welfare reform agenda and I was keen to take on a role focused on delivering services on the ground. It's been great to find so many of my colleagues have a wealth of experience of working in local offices delivering benefits. Working with local authorities (LAs) on Housing Benefit will be both interesting and challenging.

Question 3

Can you describe exactly what you do?

LAPD has a range of responsibilities, so I'll just pick out a couple of key ones. One is supporting LAs to deliver Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit in line with targets.

These targets are about the speed at which new claims are processed and levels of fraud and error. We monitor the performance of LAs so we can learn from authorities where improvements have been achieved and to highlight areas where there might be cause for concern.

In addition, we are working with other government departments and LA representatives to create, from April 2008, a new Performance Framework that is less burdensome, less prescriptive and simpler for LAs. My division consists of nearly 40 staff but will expand in April when the Performance Development Team joins us from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate. (See page 16 for more information on the PDT.)

Question 4

Talking about LA performance, what is the current picture? What are the most pressing concerns?

On the whole, LAs have become very adept at processing new claims. Over the past five years they have reduced the average time taken by three weeks.

Over 80% of LAs now process new claims in 36 days or less and 60% are achieving the top performance range of under 30 days. There have been some spectacular turnarounds in performance. Some authorities whose performance a few years ago was well into three figures are now amongst the best in Great Britain.

I am really pleased that our ministers have taken the time to visit some of these LAs to see the improved processes in action and to meet the staff. I have also just started on a programme of visits.

Looking ahead, because of issues like the abolition of benefit periods in 2004, processing claimants' changes of circumstances represents more of LAs' work than before. Our Performance Standards need to reflect this. One of our key concerns for the future is to do more to reduce errors. Our new performance measure (PM10) for next year is designed to encourage LAs to pay particular attention to this.

Question 5

What are your ambitions for your new job and what other challenges are ahead?

My ambition is to continue the good work of my predecessor, Tom Taylor, in supporting LAs to deliver the best for their clients. We need to sustain the

significant improvements in administering Housing Benefit that have been achieved in recent years and work together to deliver services as efficiently as possible. There are also wider changes that will need to be managed effectively, including improvements in our data collection processes and the roll-out of the Local Housing Allowance.

Question 6

Have there been any particular work highlights?

I attended my first DWP/LAA steering group meeting on my third day in the job. I was really impressed with the open communication and collaborative approach.

Question 7

Can you tell us a bit about your interests outside work? Do you have any hobbies?

Outside of work I enjoy playing squash and going on long walks punctuated by pub lunches. I've just taken up yoga and my resolution for 2007 is to learn to play the guitar.



➔ Left to right: Kath Murphy, Wendy Fisher, Tony Oldman, Ilona Blue

Yorkshire pioneers better benefits service

New technology is helping to deliver a better benefits service to a large part of rural Yorkshire.

In terms of area, East Riding of Yorkshire Council is the largest unitary local authority in England, stretching from the coast to the edge of York. Every year, its 314,000 residents make nearly 14,000 Housing Benefit claims and 22,000 Council Tax Benefit claims totalling over £55 million.

Since it was formed in 1996, the council has built a national reputation for its innovative approach to the delivery of public services. By 2002, it had transformed its failing Benefit Service and was awarded 'Benefit Team of the Year' by the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV).

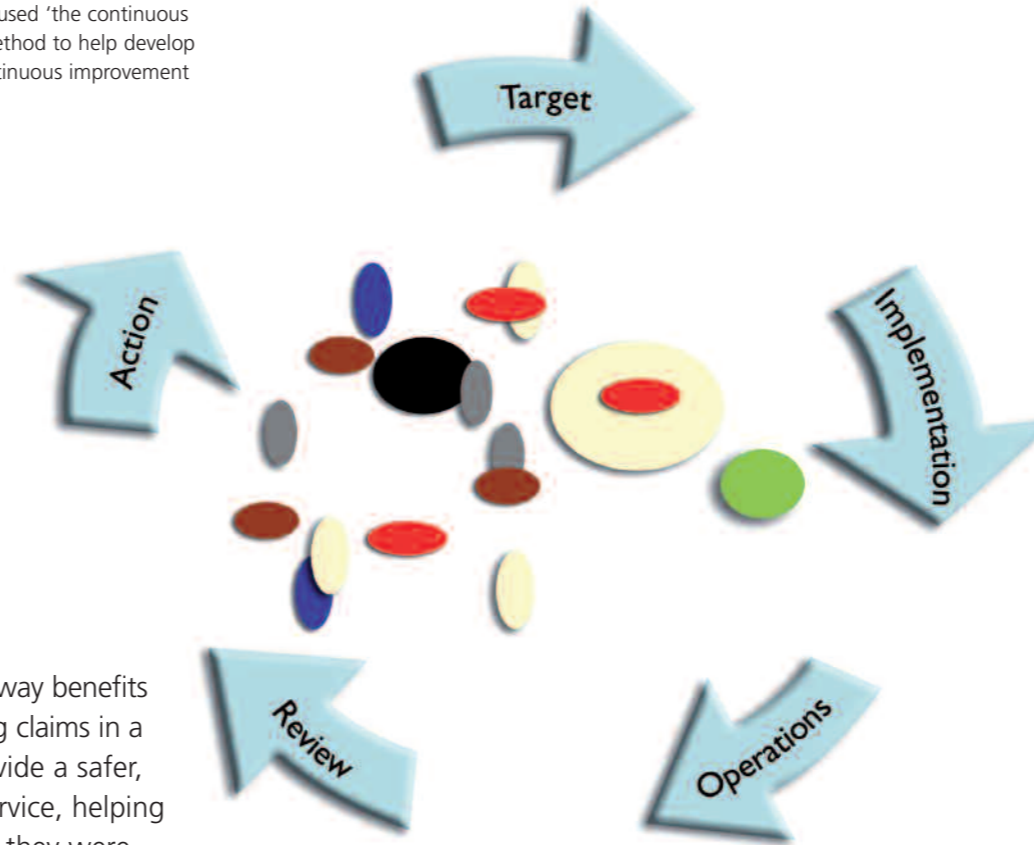
The council continued its pursuit of excellence and in October 2006, it was again awarded the same accolade from the IRRV, this time alongside its outsourcing partner arvato government services.

The council's ability to partner effectively with the private sector – and share best practice across its organisation – has been an important ingredient in its success to date.



EAST RIDING
OF YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

➔ The East Riding used 'the continuous quality circle' method to help develop a culture of continuous improvement



Reputation for innovation

East Riding wanted to revolutionise the way benefits were delivered to residents by processing claims in a customer's own home. This would provide a safer, more convenient and more efficient service, helping those in most need access the support they were entitled to.

Working in partnership with Kirona and Northgate Information Solutions, new wireless technology was developed to deliver the service. This meant that council staff could visit customers and enter their details into a portable computer linked to the council's offices.

Once this system was successfully implemented, events were held to disseminate the knowledge and expertise gained.

This technology is now being adopted by other benefit services across the UK. More importantly, residents of East Riding are benefiting, with almost 1,800 extra pensioners being eligible for Council Tax Benefit during the last 12 months.

This growing reputation for delivering complex IT systems prompted a neighbouring local authority to approach East Riding for assistance with its core IT system, which required replacing within a short timescale.

East Riding staff were on hand to provide support and the new system was introduced in record time.

Investing in people

As with every success story, people are the most important asset and, to support this, a dedicated training team works to develop the technical and soft skills of staff. Targeted training has been delivered, including a 'leadership in action' programme and the Institute of Customer Services awards.

A regional IRRV NVQ Assessment Centre in the East Riding will deliver training across the region.

Public private partnership

As part of its commitment to improve delivery and quality of public services, the East Riding of Yorkshire Council formed a new public private partnership (PPP) in October 2005.

Its partner was arvato government services, part of Bertelsmann – one of the world's largest media groups. In an eight-year agreement, arvato is managing services such as revenues and benefits, information and communication technology, customer services and payroll management.

This has delivered a sustained improvement in performance, using combined skills from the private sector and the public sector.

For example, several key performance indicators are now monitored daily, enabling staff to react instantly to downturns or changes. The current performance of the Benefit Services is an excellent four-star rating.

A culture of continuous improvement has also been developed with the aim of spreading best practice across the organisation. A quality management system has been introduced, designed to help improve service quality.

What next?

East Riding's partnership with arvato continues to go from strength to strength and the ambition is for the council to be among the top 10% based on performance. Its ability to leverage the partnership's combined skills and expertise will play an important role in achieving that ambition.

? To learn more ...

Email caroline.hopkins@arvatogov.co.uk
Head of Partnership & Commercial Services, East Riding of Yorkshire Council; Head of Customer Centric Services, arvato government services

Sedgefield turns it around

At Sedgefield Borough Council it takes 20 days to process a new claim and 12 for a change of circumstance. But, back in 1999 and following the introduction of the Verification Framework, it was a very different story – it took 102 days to process a new claim! Here Colin Jennings who runs Revenues and Benefits at the council shares the secrets of its success...



Inspiration

Colin visited some top performing local authorities (LAs) to seek guidance and inspiration and the main thing he found was that other services had more resources. A private sector 'benefits delivery' company which he invited to look broadly at Sedgefield's service, advised a 'back and front office' split and that it should use an Electronic Document Management System (EDMS). These were imperative for Sedgefield to make improvements.

A report was presented to the council's cabinet that made a case for extra financial investment in both staff and IT. It also included a comprehensive Improvement Plan with more than 100 recommendations for action to bring the service up to standard.

During this time the service was quickly declining due to a further backlog build-up and a high staff turnover. Filling the gaps with agency staff was using up a large proportion of the service's budget.

Once more internal funding was secured, Colin made a successful bid to the Performance Standards Fund (PSF) for an EDMS and started recruiting.

Colin Jennings,
Revenues Services
Manager

Drastic improvements

Colin believes that the EDMS was the key factor that turned around Sedgefield's Benefits Service. As well as drastically reducing processing times in its first year, the EDMS also freed up resources to focus on other improvements.

Colin used a further PSF award for a temporary training officer post to train all the new recruits and existing staff and this officer was the next best improvement driver.

Colin also saw the chance to further restructure the service by transferring the customer service call element of the Benefits Service to the authority's corporate customer service centre (CSC). Colin puts the success of the transfer down to the recruitment of an HB expert into a supervisory role. This reduced the re-direction of complex calls to the 'back office'. There is good communication now, for example, monthly meetings between supervisors and managers within the Benefits Service and the CSC.

During the changes staff were constantly informed of progress towards planned improvements and kept motivated by the future promise of working in a nicer and brighter environment. After the EDMS was installed, the training officer post was also made permanent to ensure continuity and consistency of a high quality service.

Charter Mark award

After the restructure the service moved into a steady state of improved delivery. It was the right time to work towards meeting the final goal of the Improvement Plan – a Charter Mark award for the Benefits Service. Colin felt 'a fresh pair of eyes' would help turn this goal into reality and appointed a dedicated Improvement Officer.

In partnership with Durham County Council, the officer highlighted the set-up of a video link between



a village community centre and Sedgefield's corporate customer call centre. This was a key component to satisfy the Charter Mark criteria. Along with improvements brought about by the EDMS, it helped earn the Charter Mark for enabling customers' easy access to HB/CTB benefits. But the improvements didn't stop there. Sedgefield bought an online benefits calculator and helped develop its pension credit calculation enhancement. Colin took the lead on a joint bid between the seven districts in County Durham to secure PS funding to expand the use of their calculator into an electronic online claim system.

The new claim system went live in Sedgefield in January and the project was completed in March. A homeworking pilot is working well and likely to become permanent shortly. Colin already has ideas for more projects – taking the online claims system to customers in their homes, simplifying customer take-up of other LA benefits and generally improving the experience of benefit claimants in Sedgefield.

Partnership pilot's positive change

Another new Jobcentre Plus process! More impacts and headaches for local authorities to handle! This was the reaction of Christine Dyer of North Lincolnshire LA on learning that a pilot was to be introduced in her local Jobcentre Plus District.



But she was pleasantly surprised...

"When I was advised about the pilot my heart sank, more incomplete claims arriving sooner adding to the turnaround time. Close liaison with Jobcentre Plus and Housing Benefit Strategy Division (HBSD) alleviated many concerns. Thankfully we have seen no adverse effects and possibly even an improvement," she said.

DWP, like all organisations, constantly reassesses its processes to improve customer service and efficiency, which is informed by the associated performance figures. As a result, Jobcentre Plus recently introduced an amended version of its Standard Operating Model (SOM). It was tested with the aim of improving speed of claim processing and removing areas of duplication – it focused on processing customers' claims as quickly as possible.

Significant work took place before the final process was agreed. In fact, HBSD first became involved in its development in December 2005. The impacts on HB/CTB administration were considered, time was spent with the Jobcentre Plus central design team developing the revised SOM, and HBSD liaised with the local Jobcentre Plus team to ensure LAs were involved.

Ringling the changes

Several process changes were suggested. HBSD ensured that Jobcentre Plus staff would still forward evidence to LAs after they had received the LA Input Document. This meant the level of completeness provided should not be compromised.

Both LAs involved in the trial responded positively to the pilot and monitored its effects by providing information for analysis. It covered both the timing

of transfer and the quality and completeness of information and evidence contained within the LA Input Document.

The prompt transfer of the LA Input Document aims to speed up the customers' claim processing. However, both HBSD and the LAs involved raised concerns about the level of completeness and the effect on LA Performance Measures. But they trialled the process, as the wider projected improvements would improve customer service. Monitoring has shown that processing times have improved and completeness has not suffered. This is, in part, due to the fact that

"We have seen no adverse effects and possibly even an improvement."

the Jobcentre Plus staff at processing centres are now processing claims as they receive documents. This allows the LA to consider HB/CTB decisions quicker on the basis of a primary benefit being in payment.

Positive outcomes

The initiative that both North and North East Lincolnshire agreed to trial was not one that had obvious benefits for LAs. However, through close local liaison and central policy representation, outcomes have been positive. Closer working is widely seen as both efficient and productive and further work to develop links between Jobcentre Plus, LA and HMRC is now being tested in Wallsend. Back in Lincolnshire, documentation is now being received 60% quicker with up to three in four cases received being instantly processed.

This process was fine-tuned over several months in the Lincolnshire area and is now being rolled out nationally. Many of the same reservations about the actual impacts of the process are now being aired. It is appreciated that a pilot, regardless of length and the numbers involved, can never fully test the diversity of situations encountered by each of the 408 LAs affected by the change. Accepting that change can often lead to an initial downturn in performance, those involved in the Lincolnshire pilot have proved that, through closer working and clear understanding of the impacts, this process can lead to positive outcomes for all concerned.



? To learn more ...
 HBSD is still monitoring effects of this process and want to hear about your experiences.
 Email hbsdmp.wweg@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Action on fraud and error

James Plaskitt, the Minister responsible for fraud and error in HB/CTB, has launched the DWP's 'Action plan for tackling fraud and error in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit'.

Local authorities (LAs) have halved fraud levels since 2002/03. The action plan aims to build on that success, and reduce customer error, which has increased since 2002/03 and now accounts for £440m of overpayments.

The new plan is based around four themes, and details the significant improvements the DWP will make in these areas, which are:

- making the best use of information and data DWP holds, or has access to
- influencing customer behaviour, to ensure customers report all relevant changes in circumstances
- improving IT and processes, so that they work in the most efficient way
- empowering local authorities and partner organisations.

We are encouraging LAs to use whatever mix of counter fraud and error activities is most appropriate for them.



This last theme recognises there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to fraud and error in HB/CTB. Instead, we are encouraging LAs to use whatever mix of counter fraud and error activities is most appropriate for them.

The new PM10 will measure how well LAs encourage customers to report changes in their circumstances and identify unreported changes. We will support LAs to use their resources to tackle fraud and particularly customer error (and meet their PM10 target) by providing information and advice on what works on our website.

In his speech at the IRRV conference on 7 February, where the plan was launched, Mr Plaskitt asked LAs to accept a deal with the DWP. The Department is making improvements to the HB/CTB system, and putting advice on how to tackle fraud and error on the website. In return, Mr Plaskitt asked LAs to continue to take fraud and error seriously, and ensure they make the best use of their resources to tackle incorrectness in HB/CTB.

? To learn more ...

Visit www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/fraud-error.asp

Turning the tide on fraud and error

Two security performance measures are being replaced by a single new one which will measure reductions in benefit entitlement. We look at details of the changes.

Out with the old

From April 2007, local authorities will no longer have to complete interventions on half of their caseload or visit 20% of their cases. In a move towards giving councils more flexibility, Performance Measures 10 and 12 are being replaced with just one which will measure **outputs** rather than **activities**.

The new Performance Measure 10 will simply measure reductions in benefit entitlement. Councils will be rewarded both for their intervention and detection activities as well as for claimants voluntarily reporting changes in their circumstances.

In with the new

Preparations for new Performance Measure 10 began last November with a series of 11 roadshows around the country for local authority benefits staff. John Viggers, Fraud & Error Policy Team leader, said, "The problem's like water flowing into a bath – the tub's filling up with claimant overpayments faster than benefit teams can empty it.

The answer is to turn off that tap and get claimants to report changes of circumstance before they become overpayments."

Final preparations

From April, monthly figures for each council will be published on the Housing Benefit Operational Database (HoBOD) along with progress towards their annual targets. This will allow councils to monitor the impact of any one-off exercises, such as targeted mailshots, and to see in which risk groups their activities are having the most impact.

Working together to share ideas, delegates at the roadshows came up with suggestions on how new targets could be met, such as:

- better targeting of interventions
- contacting claimants with predicted changes
- accepting notification of changes by telephone
- better publicity
- using scans and reports to check for errors.

DWP will provide advice and information on the effectiveness of activities local authorities can use to tackle fraud and error. We are researching what measures work best for individual customers and what resources are needed.

? To learn more ...

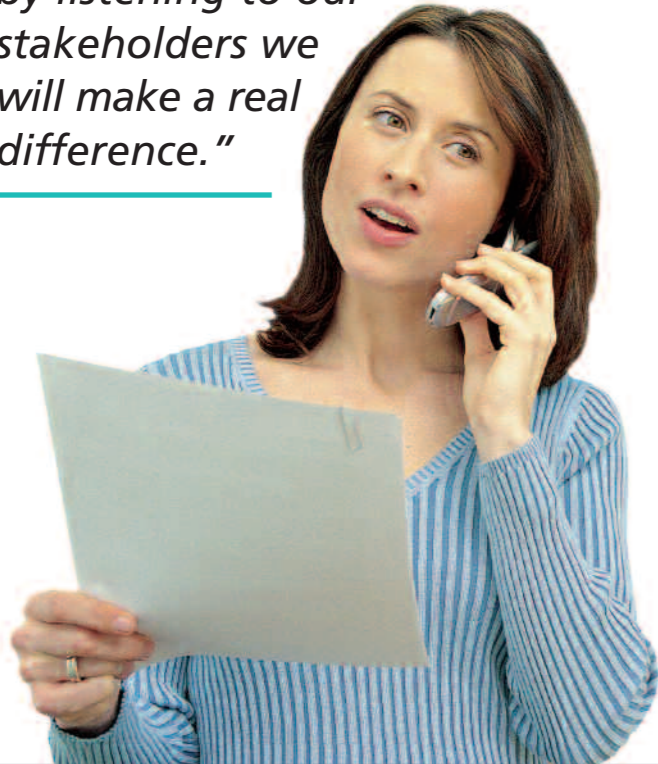
Visit www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/fraud-error.asp

PDT joins LAPD

From April the work of the new Performance Development Team (PDT) will transfer to DWP's Local Authority Performance Division (LAPD).

The reorganisation is part of DWP's ongoing commitment to support improvement in local authorities (LAs). It also follows strong representation from customers and stakeholders that the work of the PDT should continue when Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) inspection functions transfer to the Audit Commission in April 2008.

"I'm confident that by listening to our stakeholders we will make a real difference."



The new team will be headed by Bill Hern and comprise 16 performance specialists. This will bring a great deal of BFI's expertise and technical knowledge to the new team.

The team will build on the success of the existing PDT and provide support to LAs in the face of future challenges. Bill wants to hear views from stakeholders on how best to provide the support they need.

The new team was represented at the IRRV Benefits conference in Harrogate, providing an excellent opportunity to talk to delegates about their future work.

The new team will provide a much wider remit so it can provide maximum support to all stakeholders. This will involve much more proactive sharing of good practices, working with groups of LAs and focusing on areas of concern, such as efficiency. Other aspects will include:

- working closely with DWP colleagues and LAs to focus on authorities that will benefit most from PDT support
- work that helps towards achieving the Public Sector Agreement target for fraud and error
- work that helps inform, implement and evaluate policy.

Bill said, "I'm hugely conscious that there are challenging times ahead for local authorities and the department. I'm equally determined that the PDT will be at the forefront of providing real and tangible support to our stakeholders. We are a relatively small team and need to maximise our coverage as well as focus on what really matters. I'm confident that by listening to our stakeholders and working with them we will make a real difference."

? To learn more ...

Tel Cheryl Weaver on 020 7412 1205
Email cheryl.weaver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk