



⤴ Benefits come from BECS

⤵ Quicker claims go nationwide

⤶ Incentives to move into work





Foreword

From Mark Fisher3

News

Accessing services online3

Your views wanted4

Wouldn't it be nice?6

New councils, new opportunities. 14



Authentication and authorisation 16

Case studies



Success brings national roll-out 8

Better benefits with BECS 10

Meet OLIVE 12



Editor's comment

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

Read about the wide reaching consultation on reforming the current Housing Benefit system. Your involvement will be crucial in taking the reforms forward.

Meet OLIVE which represents a significant shift in our efforts to improve Council Tax Benefit take-up among pensioners.

This edition also features contributions from your fellow local authorities. Shropshire Council explains how it successfully met the challenges posed by merging six councils into one unitary authority. We also include an article from Chester City Council which has taken its inspiration from some footballer called Beckham to enhance their performance turnaround times.

It's always good to see articles inspired by your colleagues' own experiences. So please keep them coming.

I welcome feedback and am 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 call me on 020 7449 5410 to discuss potential articles. I look forward to hearing from you.

Robert Sneddon



☞ Mark Fisher,
Director of
Benefit Strategy
Directorate

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to introduce this edition of **moredirect** at a particularly challenging time for us all.

We are all feeling the effects of the economic downturn. To support you through this, we announced earlier this year additional administration subsidy of £45 million for 2009/10 to help you deliver Housing and Council

Tax Benefit services. We will continue to monitor the impact that the downturn has on future workloads and this will inform any future decisions on subsidy.

At this time, Ministers are particularly keen that we find ways of making our benefits more accessible. We need to ensure that customers receive all the financial assistance to which they are entitled.

Many local authorities have responded by finding even more innovative ways of encouraging Housing and Council Tax Benefit take-up. Read about Sandwell Council's experience of taking this work forward on page 6.

The traditional benefit claim form process is being turned on its head. The aim is to actively target individuals and make Council Tax Benefit more accessible. Further details are on page 12.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are essential to tackling poverty. We all need to continue to work together to provide financial support to those who need it most.

Accessing services online

As part of DWP's commitment to improving the access customers have to its services, the Department has developed the online **Benefits Adviser Service (BAS)**.

Available through the Directgov website, BAS provides customers with information and entitlement advice on 28 benefits, pensions and credits based on their circumstances.

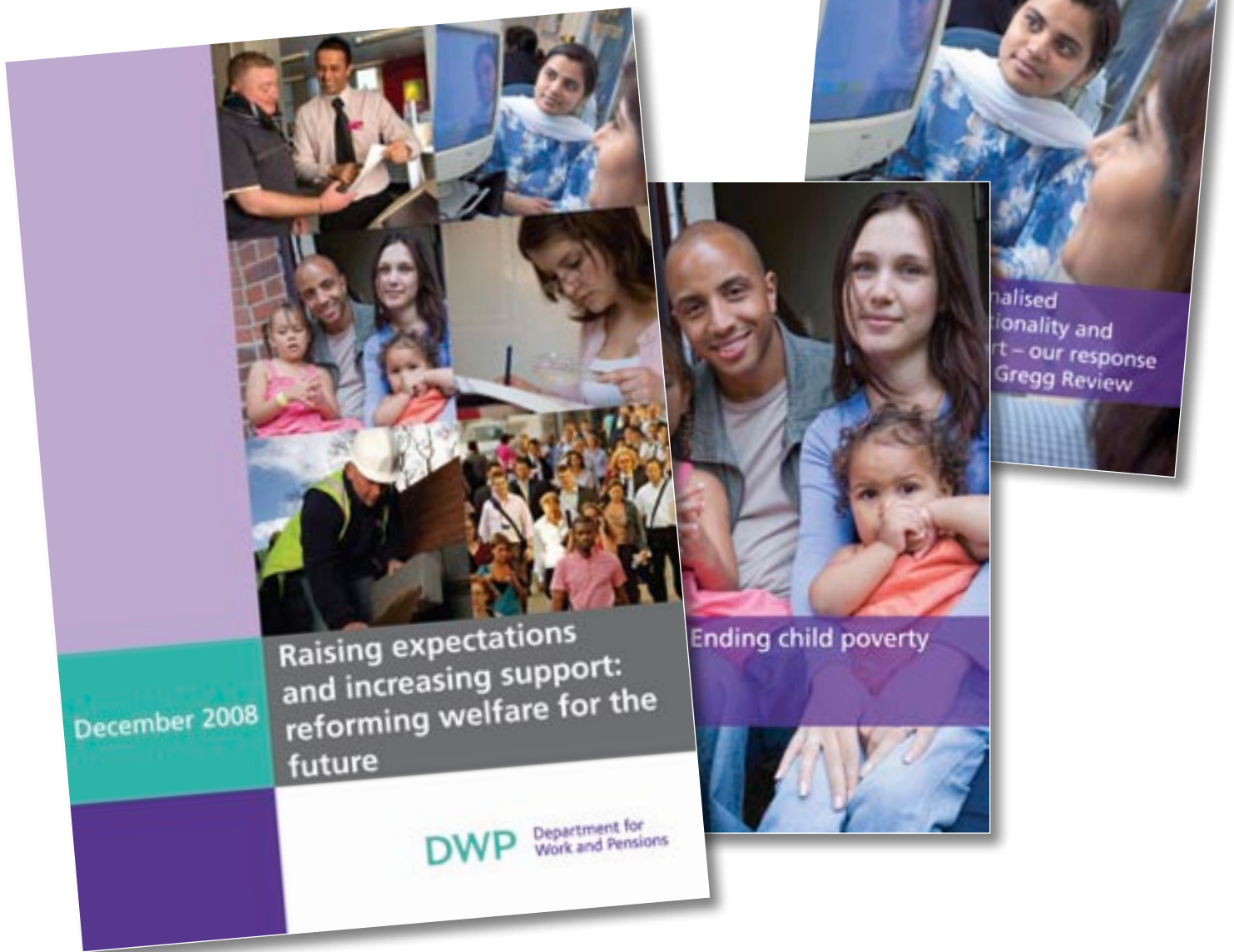
Customers are also directed to contact details that will help them make a claim. There are also links to other

services already available on the internet, such as online claim services, jobsearch and state pension forecasting.

BAS is something our customers have told us they want. They value the ability to use online services to find out which benefits they are entitled to and to access our information whenever and wherever it suits them. Feedback from customers so far is good and indicates that customers are able to find all or part of the information they are looking for.

? To learn more ...

Take a look at the service online at: <http://campaigns.direct.gov.uk/benefitsadviser>



Your views wanted

A wide-reaching consultation on reforming the current Housing Benefit (HB) system is about to start.

In the 2008 Budget, the Government announced a review of the working age HB system. It said:

“Despite Housing Benefit being available both in and out of work, it is still seen by some as a disincentive to work. Expenditure is also rising, even though the number of people claiming is forecast to remain static. As the Local Housing Allowance is introduced, the

Government will therefore undertake a comprehensive review of the working age Housing Benefit system to look at its effectiveness, particularly in promoting work incentives, efficiency and fairness and to ensure that it represents value for money for the taxpayer.”

The joint DWP/HM Treasury internal review on HB looked at the effectiveness of the system. In particular, it considered how successful it is in promoting work incentives, efficiency and fairness and to ensure that it represents value for money for the taxpayer. The HB review began in April 2008 and reported to Ministers at the end of December.

- ➔ The HB system must support the wider welfare system in helping people move in to work

So far, this review has been internal. Because of this, we have not been actively seeking input from external organisations or interest groups. But we have been engaging with local authority associations and the devolved administrations. If such external groups have offered to submit evidence for consideration by the review team, we have been happy to receive it. Several organisations have already done this.

As part of the Welfare Reform White Paper, 'Raising expectations and increasing support: Reforming welfare for the future' published in December 2008 (www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/raisingexpectations/fullversion.pdf), we provided an update on the review. We outlined 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 in to work; delivering value for money for the tax payer; and ensuring the system is fair to working families not on benefits.

In the White Paper, we also announced our intention to launch a public 12-week consultation on HB reform early in 2009. This will begin with the publication of a reform consultation document. In this, we aim to set out the long-term vision for HB reform and a potential strategy for achieving our objectives. This includes value for money and setting out any early steps we may need to take.

Consultation process and document

An exact publication date for the consultation document is yet to be confirmed. But it will be in the first half of 2009. We want to ensure that key stakeholders like you are given the chance to be fully engaged in the consultation.

We aim to have a combination of events such as stakeholder-specific round tables and workshops in the lead-up to and during the consultation process. There are a lot of issues to address, particularly around improving the work incentives faced by HB customers.



Emerging current HB system questions

- Do HB customers have access to higher cost and greater standard of accommodation than those in work and not on benefits could afford?
- Does the HB calculation itself need to be adjusted so that the housing and location choices HB customers make better reflect those faced by those on low incomes and in work?
- Is there more we could be doing to improve the transition into work for HB customers?

There are a lot of important questions we need to ask our key stakeholders.

Your involvement is crucial!

Wouldn't it be nice?

A council in the West Midlands goes on the buses and on the air to make sure its residents don't miss out on benefits.

"With the country in the grip of the credit crunch, wouldn't it be nice to be entitled to a little extra cash? Living with the credit crunch means it can be hard to find the money to pay your rent to your landlord. So wouldn't it be nice to get a helping hand?"

Local radio message

If you've driven in the Sandwell area recently you'll have heard this message on local radio and read it on the back of buses.

Like many councils, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has responded proactively to the credit crunch. It has accelerated its already innovative and successful take-up strategy to ensure members of the local community receive all the financial assistance to which they are entitled.

An eight-week radio campaign targeted workers in 'drivetime' and lunchtime shows and owner occupiers at other times of the day. It was specifically designed to capture hard-to-reach groups who, research has found, may be unaware of their possible entitlement to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit.

📍 Sue Knowles (left) and Liz Tapako of Sandwell Council





Demographic information was used to target particular bus routes with advertisements on the back of the buses and further information available inside.

Early signs

The success of the campaign is being measured through surveys and a specific web address which enables the council to count the number of 'hits' as a direct result of the ads.

Sue Knowles and Liz Tapako of Sandwell Council have been heavily involved in the campaign. Sue said, "The early signs are that the campaign is proving highly effective. In addition, we're working to identify businesses where there may be short-time working or redundancies with a view to advising employees about benefit entitlement."

Sandwell wants to maximise take-up of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit to support its own and national priorities to reduce poverty, deprivation, homelessness and worklessness. Increased take-up contributes to the council's three key priorities:

- every child matters
- safer, cleaner, active communities
- economy, skills and jobs.

The council is currently obtaining detailed demographic information about each town in Sandwell with a longer-term aim of breaking this down still further to ward level. This information will then be used to better target future take-up initiatives.

In response to the credit crunch the council has redoubled its efforts to support its community. A Tackling Debt in Sandwell group has been set up. This is headed by a lead councillor and brings together all relevant agencies in Sandwell to help reduce debt and provide financial support and advice for the community. Ian Hubball, Sandwell's Revenues and Benefits Service Manager, is a member of the group. He explained, "The group comprises not only the relevant parts of the council but also Citizens Advice, welfare rights groups, credit unions, banks, building societies, colleges and others.

"We share ideas and information on how Sandwell should approach the issue of debt and we've a website giving advice on how to deal with it and apply for benefits. One of our key aims is to ensure everyone in Sandwell gets the benefit to which they are entitled."

Sandwell's efforts are being replicated by many councils across Britain. They complement the work of the Take-Up Taskforce (see HB Direct issue 85) which aims to lift 400,000 children out of poverty by ensuring everyone entitled to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit receives it.



To learn more ...

For more information about the work of the Take-Up Taskforce please contact Bill Hern at bill.hern@dpw.gsi.gov.uk. If you want to know more about Sandwell's Housing and Council Tax Benefit take-up strategy please contact Sue Knowles at Sue_Knowles@sandwell.gov.uk

Success brings national roll-out



In our last edition we brought you news of the In and Out of Work pilots. These enable several benefits to be claimed with just one contact. So successful have the pilots been that the project is going nationwide.

In and Out of Work is a joint initiative between local authorities, Jobcentre Plus and HM Revenue & Customs. Streamlined processes provide a single point of contact, through Jobcentre Plus, not just for Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support, but also for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and tax credits.

Evaluation of the pilots showed an increase in efficiency across a range of measures. They also proved popular with staff and customers alike. So much so that in October 2008, Ministers announced plans for full implementation of the processes across England, Scotland and Wales.

Meeting staff and customers who had experienced the new service at Clapham Common Jobcentre in south London, DWP Minister Lord McKenzie said, "We hope by speeding up the process for benefit and credit payment in this way, more people will be encouraged to take up opportunities for short-term work. In the past, they might have been put off by a lengthy process of informing all the relevant bodies. By providing a single point of contact for customers seeking support when either in or out of work, we can provide a more efficient service to our customers as well as reduce the likelihood of overpayments."

The first tranche of implementation was completed in December 2008, with ten new sites joining the original six pilot areas. These new sites were Scottish Borders, West Dunbartonshire, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde, Southwark, North East Derbyshire, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Guildford, Plymouth and Caerphilly.

Inverclyde Council was one of the first local authorities to go live in the first tranche. Tracy Bunton, Principal Benefits Officer explained, "We read about the pilots in various communications and immediately recognised the potential benefits for our customers."



“Historically, employment patterns in our area show that a significant number of opportunities are for work which is only short term. We wanted to adopt the new processes to help encourage more people to take up these opportunities, particularly considering the current economic climate.

“We worked very closely with our Jobcentre Plus Regional Implementation Manager. This provided invaluable support to help us understand the new processes and up-skill our staff. It was obvious that Jobcentre Plus wanted to make this a real success for us.”



☛ Left to right: Andrew Baird, System Administrator; Aileen Hatherall, Benefit Assessor; Graeme McBride, Benefit Assessor; Tracy Bunton, Principal Benefits Officer; Angela Logan, Standards & Monitoring Officer; Lesley Bennett, Benefits Supervisor

Tracy continued, “Our staff have been really positive about the change, particularly when they realised how it was going to benefit our customers. From day one we saw real improvements.

“We were able to process into-work claims within a day. Before, it could have taken three to four weeks. We have also seen improvements in the speed of tax credit payments.

“Colleagues involved in the pilots who helped to develop the processes have done a great job in creating a product you can use ‘straight out of the box’. I can assure other authorities ready to go live that it is a straightforward and worthwhile process to implement.”

Plans were developed for the second tranche of implementation and new areas went live in February and March of this year. Full implementation is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2009.

A brochure aimed at local authorities has been produced that provides background to the project and what they need to do to get involved. With it comes a DVD. Both have been distributed to chief executives in each local authority through the Jobcentre Plus Regional Implementation Managers as part of their engagement activity.

? To learn more ...

Visit the DWP website and search for ‘In and Out of Work processes’.



Better benefits with BECS

The benefits team at Chester doesn't know the meaning of standing still. Craig Geens, the city council's Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Service, explains how it is improving its service with BECS. And it's nothing to do with football or beer!

Chester's benefits service is already acknowledged nationally by DWP who visited us to use our methods as a best practice service. In particular, DWP was impressed with the way we improved performance while delivering considerable efficiency savings. Communities and Local Government were also very impressed by our work with the homeless sector.

“Even I can use BECS! Those of you that know me will realise that is a great endorsement.”

Craig Geens

Performance turnaround time for new claims for 2007/08 was 18 days, which put us in the top 40 councils (and top 10%) nationally.

But in a bid to do even better, we evaluated the latest technology that we felt would improve customer service by making life simpler and improve performance.

We were very impressed by Team Netsol Ltd’s product called the Benefit Expert Computer System, otherwise known as BECS. My only previous experience of BECS was the bottled lager from Germany and cheering on Beckham at England games!

Dave Clarke from Team Netsol provided excellent advice and his ‘techie’ experts Damian and Greg were efficient and professional throughout our implementation phase.

There are too many key people in Chester to mention by name. But the team ethos played a big part in the successful implementation of this product.

In a nutshell, the system starts as a calculator. It then pre-populates answers into an intelligent application form, only asking questions relevant to each customer. Finally, it delivers the claimant information to our core benefit system, Academy, through a secure ‘holding area’.

Even I can use BECS! Those of you that know me will realise that is a great endorsement. The outcomes have been:

- improved customer satisfaction rates
- processing times for online new applications of 10 days, bringing our overall average down to 15 days
- less paper

- improved access to our service:
 - 24/7 over the internet
 - ability to use BECS in the Citizens Advice and Housing Trust offices
 - fewer incomplete claims
 - more supporting evidence at first point of contact
- a new benefit entitlement letter/Council Tax bill generated on the same day as a claim is completed online
- efficiency savings through reduced time on end-to-end processes.

Start to finish

We didn’t just want to tick a box to say we had an online benefit form available on our website. Instead, we wanted to assist the customer so that we got a complete claim and supporting evidence to assess at first point of contact.

We now have ‘benefit experts’ in relevant customer contact areas who can deal with a claim from start to finish in an average of 40 minutes.

There is also a major contribution from our Revenues Team and Customer Service staff to ensure the whole process is joined up. We also work closely with our Housing Trust to align the tenancy sign-up process with the benefit application.

If you are interested in real improvements for the customer, as opposed to ways of making performance stats look good, then BECS is worth a look.

Don’t take my word for it. Come and see the people using BECS at Chester day in, day out. I will then take you to our brainstorming office (aka the local pub) and buy you a bottle of Becks!

? To learn more ...

Call Helen Peters on **01244 402352**.

Meet OLIVE

Ministers are determined that we should find ways of making Council Tax Benefit (CTB) more accessible. One of the initiatives designed to do this involves trying to identify pensioners who are entitled to CTB but who are not receiving it. Ben Aylott from the Housing Benefit Strategy Division explains how it works.



Our research project is known as OLIVE. That stands for Odyssey Live Intelligence Verification Exercise. We are very grateful to the local authorities who have been helping us.

We had already made progress in targeting help for pensioners. Since December 2005, people claiming Pension Credit on the phone have been able to access CTB (and Housing Benefit if appropriate) during the same phone call to what is now the Pension Disability and Carers Service (PDCS).

Because most of the information gathered for Pension Credit applies also to the other two benefits, PDCS simply completed an additional short claim for them. This was sent to the customer for checking, signing and sending to the local authority for processing.

But we knew we needed to do more because we found that only about 50% of these short claim forms were sent to local authorities by customers. And so, since November 2008, we have eliminated the short claim form from the process.

PDCS still takes the information over the phone but then passes it directly to the local authority for processing. This way, CTB can be awarded without a written claim.

Customers are sent, by PDCS, a written record of the information they have given. They are told to check it and report any mistakes or omissions direct to the local authority.

But we didn't stop there. Although this work will improve CTB take-up among new PDCS customers, there is still a significant number of existing pensioners who we believe are eligible for the benefit but are not receiving it. We call these 'entitled non-recipients'.

OLIVE represents a significant shift in our efforts to improve CTB take-up among pensioners. The current arrangements mark an improvement in customer service. But access to CTB depends on a Pension Credit claim. And we know many pensioners not entitled to Pension Credit may still be eligible for help with their Council Tax.

"OLIVE turns the traditional benefit claim process on its head. It involves proactively targeting individuals without any prompting from the individuals themselves."

Ben Aylott

We already use data to identify individuals' eligibility for, and to estimate their entitlement to, Pension Credit. By including Council Tax data we believe it may be possible to use the model to identify pensioners who are entitled non-recipients.

This will be far removed from general awareness campaigns where individuals take the initiative themselves. We look forward to seeing the public reaction to being targeted in this way.

Key to the success of OLIVE will be just how effective the system is at successfully identifying entitled non-recipients. In theory it should work. This research tests the practicalities and enables us to identify what improvements need to be made to the model for greater accuracy.

In October 2008, PDCS provided each participating local authority with the names, addresses and, where held, phone numbers of pensioners in their area who were thought to be entitled non-recipients.

The local authorities contacted these customers by post, phone and/or personal visit to invite a CTB claim, and recorded the outcomes. The results will tell us:

- if OLIVE works – can it really identify pensioner entitled non-recipients?
- how well it works – does it identify a high percentage of entitled non-recipients?
- how accurately OLIVE predicts the amount of CTB entitlement
- how people reacted to being targeted without any action on their part.

All this information is being analysed and we hope to have results later this spring with which to inform the future strategy regarding take-up of CTB.

OLIVE partners

Our research partners are:

- Kirklees Metropolitan Council
- London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
- Swansea City Council
- Durham County Council (district councils involved are City of Durham, Derwentside, Sedgfield, Easington, Wear Valley, Chester-le-Street and Teesdale).

New councils, new opportunities

April 2009 sees one of the biggest changes of Local Government for many years. Local Government Reorganisation will result in 44 local authorities being merged into nine 'super councils'. Bill Hern of the DWP Performance Development Team (PDT) reports on the changes taking place in Shropshire.



Communities and Local Government is overseeing the overall programme. But the PDT has been working with the Local Government Association and the relevant local authorities to ensure all benefits service issues were identified and addressed before April 2009.

A whole raft of issues had to be resolved. These ranged from subsidy and performance measures to bank accounts and LASER codes.

The biggest problem has concerned interfaces between DWP IT systems and those of the new unitary authorities. But steps are well under way to make sure 'LAIDs', 'LACIs' and 'ETDs', etc. go to the right place as the benefits services merge into one.

Shropshire Council legally became one of the new authorities on 1 April, although it has operated as a shadow unitary from 5 February 2009.

Steph Jackson, Head of Exchequer Services at Shropshire, explained that in the very early stages of planning, the Implementation Executive approved the 'One Council for Shropshire' blueprint.

The vision outlined in the document promised a number of real benefits for Shropshire customers and taxpayers. These included improved services, access to the best standard of service across the county and better access to services locally.

Joining up services more effectively clears confusion and brings financial savings and lower Council Tax increases.

Planning to deliver this vision has involved hard work, difficult decisions and close working with members and staff from each of the six councils involved in the reorganisation.



☞ Mark Simpson,
North and Central
Benefits Manager

"It was not easy to align strategies and services across a new authority with the largest geographical area of any inland unitary authority in England," Steph said.

"However, many of the District Councils had already begun to share services where budgetary implications made it impractical to continue to work alone. So this helped the transition.

"I'm confident we're ready to deliver our vision and certain we can deliver a leading edge, modern and innovative service that matches the best the public or private sector can offer."

Basic information

As well as introducing efficiencies, the reorganisation will result in customers receiving an improved service. There will be an increase in the number of customer outlets with an additional Revenues and Benefits office in one of the market towns.

In addition, it is planned to extend the present 20 Customer First points where customers can obtain basic information about services. They can also complete applications (including Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit), pay for services and notify changes of circumstances.

Eleven of the Customer First points will also offer video conferencing which gives face-to-face access to a customer services officer. It requires no technical expertise on the part of the customer.



☞ Steph Jackson,
Head of Exchequer
Services

In addition 35 locations, called Broadplaces, will be offering community-managed IT facilities. Here, customers will have access to the internet and therefore to the council's web-enabled services. This will allow them to benefit from the same services as those offered through the Customer First points.

While it is sad to see the parting of the councils in Bridgnorth, North Shropshire, Oswestry, Shrewsbury and Atcham, and South Shropshire, staff from all councils have worked together to prepare for a new unitary authority that will deliver the 'One Council for Shropshire' vision.

Mark Simpson, North and Central Benefits Manager, said, "The merging of the six councils has placed an enormous challenge on the Revenues and Benefits Services. However, there has never been any resistance despite the necessary pace of the changes. It has created a real sense of togetherness and a dogged determination to make sure that we achieve our goals."



To learn more ...

Circular HB/CTB G16/2008 gives more detail about Local Government Reorganisation.

If you want to know more about this subject or any of the issues covered in this article please contact Bill Hern at bill.hern@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or Steph Jackson at steph.jackson@shropshire.gov.uk

Authentication and authorisation

Does the need to protect customers' personal information preclude our vision of joined-up Government where customers only have to 'tell us once'? David Wright, DWP Employee Authentication Service (EAS) Project Manager, says the two things can go together.

A survey found that 86% of UK residents are worried about unauthorised access to their personal information (Source: Global Unisys Security Index Report). At the same time, the Transformational Government agenda is seeking new opportunities to share personal information to avoid customers having to tell different organisations the same thing several times.

Pete Madden, Programme Manager for DWP's Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme, said, "Setting appropriate security measures is the key to successful data sharing. If people didn't trust the controls in place for internet shopping they wouldn't have spent almost £15 billion online last year. In the public sector, knowing we can trust the people with whom we share personal information means we can tailor services to meet individual needs."



To establish trust, we need the following information:

- Can I be sure you are who you say you are?
- Can I be sure you are entitled to have access to my information?

Both these questions are dealt with by the EAS which strengthens authentication (the first question) and authorisation (the second question).

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division, said, "We already provide desktop access to DWP benefit and HMRC tax credit data to local authority users to improve the efficiency of Housing and Council Tax Benefits administration. We're now looking at providing access to other information systems we control as well as widening access to these systems. EAS enables this because it provides the best security controls on user access."

EAS is a cross-Government project delivered through a strategic partnership led by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This is supported by DWP, Communities and Local Government and local authorities.

? To learn more ...

To find out more about EAS and the possibility of your authority being involved in future piloting activity, visit the HB Information Flows Programme pages on DWP's website: www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/information-flow/whats-new/ or contact david.wright1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or tara.taggart@dwp.gsi.gov.uk