

October 2009

# moredirect



➤ Dedicated help  
in Coventry

➤ Housing and job  
advice expanded

➤ Working, earning,  
claiming



**DWP** Department for  
Work and Pensions



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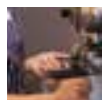
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## Editor's comment

Welcome to the autumn edition of **moredirect**. Our theme for this issue is 'Housing Benefit and work' and what is being done to raise the profile of HB as an in-work benefit. Once again we are able to feature a selection of contributions from your fellow local authorities.

On pages 8–9, read about the positive experiences your colleagues have had with the In and Out of Work initiative. This project benefits both local authorities and customers alike.

Basildon Revenues and Benefits have undergone a dramatic transformation, coping with an increased workload and moving offices at the same time. Find out how they managed all this on pages 6–7.

On pages 14–15 there's news about how Coventry City Council's dedicated Discretionary Housing Payments post has led to greater continuity and consistency.

Waltham Forest's efforts to actively remind HB customers to update their details continue to show encouraging results. Read more on page 16.

Please email feedback on the magazine or suggestions for articles that you would like to see in future editions to: [caxtonhouse.central-services-team@dwpgsi.gov.uk](mailto:caxtonhouse.central-services-team@dwpgsi.gov.uk)

Alternatively, you can call me on 020 7449 5410 to discuss potential articles.

**Robert Sneddon**

## I am pleased to introduce the latest edition of **moredirect** which explores the theme of Housing Benefit and work.

The design and delivery of Housing Benefit are key factors in helping customers make the move back into work. Housing Benefit provides an important source of support for people on low earnings and helps make work pay.

The efficient administration of HB is also vital in enabling people to manage their money to avoid debt, you have a vital role in processing and paying HB on time.

The transitional period immediately after the move into work is one of uncertainty where wages can be least reliable. The In and Out of Work project described here, helps people through the transition by allowing customers to provide information in support of their claim just once.

We will shortly be consulting on the structure of HB and I hope you will look at the proposals.

➤ Helen Goodman,  
Parliamentary  
Under-Secretary  
(Commons)



We have made progress but we need to continue to deliver an effective system of housing support especially during these challenging economic times. People need to be sure that the benefit system will support them when they need it. We are looking at new ways of making this happen.

I look forward to working with you to ensure further improvements in HB.

# Online Benefits Adviser enhanced

**The Benefits Adviser is an 'entitlement' signposting service which was launched in April 2008.**

In September of this year, we enhanced the service to give customers the opportunity to get an estimate of the amount of benefit they may be awarded.

In addition, there is a 'What if?' facility for customers to input possible changes in their circumstances to see how this would affect their benefits, for example, if they would be financially better off in work.

Three of the 11 benefits and credits covered by this enhancement are:

- Housing Benefit
- Council Tax Benefit
- Second Adult Rebate.

The service makes it clear that any financial information given is only an estimate. It's all part of the way in which DWP is improving the access customers have to its services.

These online facilities provide an extra way to contact the Department, something a growing number of our customers have told us they want.

DWP will be delivering more online services during 2010.

# Taking the fear out of starting work

The Government's commitment to a strong, healthy and prosperous society is underpinned by the belief that work is the best route out of poverty.

Work should pay. The Government's continuing reform of the welfare system has helped remove many of the barriers holding people back and put a new emphasis on helping them into work.

The Housing Benefit (HB) system needs to play a more critical role in helping people back into work. This is because, in many cases, it is the fear of falling into arrears with their rent that holds many customers back.

## What can we do?

Firstly, we need to do more to make customers aware that HB may still be available to people while they are in work. Research has shown that too few customers are aware that HB may be available in work. We need to improve the general level of awareness so that customers need not fear that they will be left on their own without help when starting work.

Customers also need greater certainty at the time of the transition into work. We know this is the period when people tend to experience the greatest uncertainty. The current Housing Benefit Extended Payments scheme helps here because it provides full benefit for four weeks when a customer finds a new job.

These payments remove some of the risk that customers might not be able to pay their rent when moving into work. But we would like to see what more we can do.

We also want to see what more we can do to make claiming in-work HB less complex. Much of this complexity arises when customers have to report minor changes in earnings to the local authority,

sometimes once a week. If HB rules could be changed so that customers need report changes in earnings less frequently, say every six months, much of this complexity could be removed.



➤ Housing Benefit may still be available to people while they are in work



Staff will spend less time entering data thanks to technological advances

# Coping with demand

**As you know, we are in a recession. A consequence of this is that more people are finding themselves needing our help and are claiming, among other benefits, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.**

DWP has recognised that this influx of queries and claims has affected all parts of our business, including those delivered by you, the local authorities.

In response to these pressures, DWP was able to secure extra funding as part of the Pre-Budget Report in November 2008. As a direct result of this, we were able to provide an additional £45 million administration subsidy for 2009/10. This enabled local authority benefit managers to make plans for dealing with the anticipated increased workload.

Evidence showed there were larger increases in claims for benefits than was originally forecast, so further funding was made available to DWP in the Budget in April. So in July there was a further £30 million increase in your monthly administration subsidy payments.

This new money will be spread across all local authorities during the year.

Authorities have responded differently in how they have used this money to help them continue to provide an efficient and effective service to their customers. For example, one local authority has adopted a two-fold strategy aimed at staffing and technology.

On the staffing front, in order to maximise value for money, they have tried to recruit benefit officers by offering 12-month contracts. This is cheaper than paying for agency staff.

With technology, they have invested in enhancements to their system which extracts information from claim forms and populates their back end payment process. As a result, staff spend less time on entering data and more on validating and deciding claims.

We are interested in hearing of any novel approaches that local authorities have used to help them improve their service during this difficult period.



**To learn more ...**

Contact [andrew.curphey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.curphey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

# Looking at the bigger picture

I wanted to shift the emphasis from targets to customers, says Scott Logan, Revenues and Benefits Manager at Basildon District Council.

Basildon's Revenues and Benefits Service has undergone a dramatic transformation, particularly from the customer's point of view. The service wasn't failing. But nor was it setting the world on fire!

I wanted to take a more holistic approach to delivering value for money. This shifted the emphasis from specific targets to the bigger picture, responding to the needs of customers and empowering staff to have full ownership of their work. Even if our performance indicators were exemplary, if the customer experience didn't reflect this, it would be impossible to manage expectations and perceptions of the service.

At the same time, we had to deal with an increased caseload caused by the downturn in the economy and an office move that could have affected staff morale. This created the need for a positive and effective management team to lead changes and take the staff with them.

My plan was to take the service to the customer and build improvements around them. To do this it was essential to have a mix of expertise and management skills to inject new ideas and drive the improvements forward.

## Action plan

I put in place an action plan beginning with a restructuring of the service. This provided the opportunity to maximise untapped existing skills and bring in new recruits where necessary. A new Operations Manager for Benefits and Support Services, along with the existing Operations Manager for Revenues, led the changes.

We also brought in expertise from the private sector to work on raising our profile, developing partner relations and improving how we engaged with customers. Key to this were outreach events and publicity campaigns.

We wanted to monitor progress beyond performance indicators. Instead, our success should be measured from our customers' perspective through feedback, the use of case studies and surveys. A benefit take-up campaign – 'Don't lose it, claim it!' – was launched with positive press coverage and local support.

There is now a paperless claims process. We telephone customers to talk them through their claim to remove the stress and inconvenience of having to navigate through a complicated claim form. We are also one of the first councils to offer an online claims process.



When we receive a claim, we arrange for a Visiting Officer to go to the customer's home to obtain electronic copies of original documents by taking digital photographs. This makes the process much easier for customers as they don't have to send paperwork in the post or worry about having to supply additional supporting documents.

### **A one-stop shop**

The office move presented an opportunity to relocate our customer contact centre with the rest of the council's services, creating a one-stop shop. The new premises are bright, clean and airy. Average waiting times have dropped to 18 minutes and we've made sure customers are comfortable while they wait.

The facilities are better, too. We offer open booths that most customers feel are adequately private with the option to discuss matters in modern, glass-fronted, private interview rooms.

Initially, these changes created some uncertainty for staff. They had been doing the same thing for a very long time. Yet, through having the chance to witness the results of more proactive, customer-focused processes, staff morale has improved. There is a marked difference in the team's commitment to providing a great service for the community. Contributing to a good experience for the customer is more rewarding and satisfying than measuring performance purely on indicators that don't always show the whole picture!

We have achieved so much over a relatively short period of time. The service is almost unrecognisable from how it used to be and there is a buzz about maintaining and improving on what we have done so far.

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*"My plan was to take the service to the customer and build improvements around them."*

**Scott Logan**

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# First-class service is reaching more customers



In the March edition of **moredirect**, we gave an update on the new process that streamlines the service customers receive as they move in and out of work. Since then, many more local authorities have started to use In and Out of Work.

In and Out of Work is a joint initiative between Jobcentre Plus, Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs and local authorities. It makes Jobcentre Plus the single point of contact for customers for key in and out of work benefits and credits.

Since October 2008, the project has been rolling out across Great Britain to provide a seamless service for certain customers as they move into and out of employment.

Reaction in the areas that have already rolled out has been very reassuring. Not only have processing times improved but customer feedback has been really positive.

## Increased confidence

There is increased confidence among customers to take up employment, particularly short-term work. This is because their benefits and credits are much more accessible and paid more quickly.

Milton Keynes went live with In and Out of Work in February 2009. Gill Long, Service Development Manager, reflected on the improvements it has brought for her authority.

"The Into Work process has been the biggest gain. Because Jobcentre Plus collects all the information on our behalf, we can make decisions on claims straight away instead of suspending and waiting for information.



Ready to help:  
Hambleton's  
Benefits Team



📍 Ask us here: Hambleton Council's main reception

"We have paid 50% more extended payments to customers not wanting to continue to claim because all the information we need to make a decision is provided for us.

"Our average turnaround time is eight days on receipt of information from Jobcentre Plus. So we are now able to advise customers much sooner on any continuing entitlement. We have found that they really appreciate this as it allows them to budget their finances right from the outset."

### All around the country

Kay Pettit, Milton Keynes' Revenues and Benefits Client Manager, shared similar experiences.

"In and Out of Work provides us with the information we need to make decisions on claims quicker. Customers are really benefiting because there is so much more information being collected on our behalf. This enables us to process extended payments and Into Work claims much earlier, without the need to re-contact the customer."

Liz Craggs, Benefit Assessment Manager at Hambleton District Council in North Yorkshire praised the way the new process has been implemented.

"I found Jobcentre Plus really supportive. Our local Jobcentre Manager and Regional Implementation Manager helped to brief our staff and provided a

walkthrough of the new processes. We have much more contact now with Jobcentre Plus and have made some really valuable contacts. Our staff have been really receptive about In and Out of Work. They are used to dealing with change but this benefits customers as well as the authority. We are already processing claims quicker because the information we are getting from Jobcentre Plus is complete, historically we would have had to get that information ourselves."

Liz continued, "We are able to approach Jobcentre Plus to discuss issues rather than approaching the customer first. We can then ensure that the customer is asked the right questions. It's a real bonus being able to speak with colleagues from Jobcentre Plus to resolve wider Housing Benefit issues."

At the time of writing, 200 local authorities had adopted In and Out of Work and roll-out is planned to be completed by early 2010.

Liz offered advice to those areas yet to go live. "Make sure your staff are well briefed and are aware of the key messages. Re-enforce the fact that Jobcentre Plus collects information on your behalf, so customers aren't approached unnecessarily. Work closely with your Regional Implementation Manager – you will get lots of support. In and Out of Work is a worthwhile process to implement, and it benefits both local authorities and customers alike."



# Social housing: a barrier to work?

**Over a third of workless people in Great Britain live in social housing. And more than half the people in social housing are unemployed or economically inactive – that’s nearly three million people of working age.**

Certain groups that are over-represented in the social rented sector are also unsuccessful in the labour market. These are people with mental and behavioural disorders, carers and those with multiple disadvantages.

This is not surprising as social housing is allocated on a ‘needs’ basis. Also, those who move out of social housing, for example through the Right to Buy scheme, are more likely to be suited to the labour market.

Living in social housing is not, in itself, a barrier to work. It is more that there are issues facing those in social sector accommodation that impact disproportionately on their employment chances. For instance, social tenancies are secure for life and can be passed to future generations. So mobility, including for employment reasons, is low among social tenants.

## Social housing and worklessness

The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University carried out a study of these issues – DWP Research Report 521 ‘Social housing and worklessness: Qualitative research findings’ August 2008. It involved interviews with 107 tenants in social housing in Derby, Islington, Peterborough and Sheffield.

The report is structured around six key themes, identified as potential areas for effective intervention. The main findings are outlined below.

### The main findings of the report

- **Social Housing as a work incentive:** The vast majority of respondents reported that living in social rented property did not present a barrier or disincentive to work. There was no evidence that involvement with the labour market attachment shifted when respondents moved between tenures.
- **Geography:** There was no consistent evidence of a culture of worklessness in deprived areas.
- **Mobility:** Few respondents reported that the difficulty of moving house within the social housing sector acted as a barrier to securing work.
- **Tax and benefits:** The complexities of the benefit system were a disincentive to entering work for some people.
- **Further barriers to work facing social tenants:** Those interviewed tended to face multiple disadvantages. These were often severe in nature and sometimes hidden from view.
- **Multiple disadvantage and integrating services:** The lives of many individuals with multiple disadvantages were made more difficult by the fragmented way in which public services operate.

Following the findings of this research, DWP is taking part in the Enhanced Housing Options Trailblazers Programmes being run by Communities and Local Government (CLG).

The programmes aim to develop innovative approaches to delivering housing and advice services. For example, housing advice could be offered to people with low and medium housing needs as well as to those whose needs are more acute. It could also be linked to wider advice about a range of issues such as training and employment, financial management and access to benefits.

Such measures could allow us to:

- meet housing need with a wider range of solutions
- use housing stock more effectively
- tackle worklessness
- improve customer service.

Two rounds of Trailblazers have been announced by CLG. In the first round, 12 councils were given the opportunity to develop their services. In the second round, announced in November 2008, 20 projects over 60 council areas were awarded funding.

DWP is funding a bespoke employment package in five of the Trailblazer areas. This will include jobpoints and direct phone lines to Jobcentre Plus in housing advice centres.

At the time of the second, a further ten projects received kick-start funding to develop their own approach to linking housing and employment advice. This funding is equivalent to the salary and on-costs of a project manager, although councils do not have to use the funding in this way.



### To learn more ...

The ‘Social housing and worklessness’ report can be found at [www.dwp.gov.uk/research-and-statistics](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/research-and-statistics)

Turn to the next page for the work of the Trailblazers in the Midlands ➔

# Trailblazers: the Midlands experience



Families are one of the client groups targeted by the schemes

## Andy Brittan gives us a flavour of how housing and employment advice is being boosted in the Midlands.

The programmes are being funded for two years. During this time they are being evaluated to examine the implementation, operation and development of the proposed service enhancements.

A consortium made up of the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, Shared Intelligence and Birmingham University's Centre for Urban and Regional Studies have been commissioned to undertake the evaluation. This will assess the success of the programme in achieving a range of outcomes and test the efficacy of the various approaches being adopted.

The findings will be used to produce a toolkit of good practice guidance for the wider distribution of the enhanced Housing Options model. There will be an interim report early in 2010 and a final report in 2011.

Schemes and proposals being tried out include coaching programmes, basic life and tenancy skills, employability skills, and job skills for people housed, or about to be housed, in the social and private rented sectors.

Many councils are using the opportunity to build or improve their relationship with Jobcentre Plus. The range of client groups includes families, young people aged 16–24, people with mental health issues, ex-offenders and those in temporary accommodation.

- **Broxtowe Borough Council** is focusing on education and life skills training for young people at risk of homelessness, worklessness and overcrowding. This includes a skills assessment as part of Housing Options.
- **Redditch Borough Council** is concentrating on employment, particularly outreach work with those made redundant or about to lose their job.
- **Nottingham City Council** has jobpoints in housing offices and is further developing its Gateway employment scheme.
- **Stoke-on-Trent City Council** is linking work and housing advice by bringing together Housing Options with its Jobs, Enterprise and Training Centres.

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*“Many councils are using the opportunity to improve their relationship with Jobcentre Plus.”*

*Andy Brittan*

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# Working, earning, still claiming

Customers don't always realise that they may still be able to get help with their rent and Council Tax when they have a job. So action is planned to tackle this barrier to work, as Nelly Lawrie explains.

As part of DWP's Welfare to Work agenda, we have carried out research into awareness and understanding of Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB). This has shown that many customers do not know they could still be entitled to these benefits even if they are working and earning.

HB and CTB help over four million low income households – more than 2.5 million of whom include someone of working age – to pay their rent and Council Tax.

HB provides customers with the confidence that they will still be able to pay their rent during the turbulent and challenging transitional period of moving into work. There are also other grants for people on low earnings which can help to make work pay.

Despite this, take-up of in-work HB is still low. We estimate that around half of working people entitled to HB still do not claim it. In addition, our research suggests that customers may have made the decision to move into work had they been aware they might still be able to claim HB once they're in a job. That's why we need your help in promoting these benefits.

DWP would like to work more closely with local authorities to build customers' understanding and tackle barriers to work for those who are unemployed and claiming benefits.



We are running workshops for benefits and employment advisers between now and Christmas. These will help explain this complex area and develop ideas to increase customers' understanding and ease their transition into work.

We are also updating our online advice and information and producing a leaflet for you to give to customers which explains their entitlement to HB and CTB when they go into work.

## **?** To learn more ...

If you are interested in hosting a workshop at your office, or receiving more campaign information, please email [nelly.lawrie@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:nelly.lawrie@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)



Coventry's DHP team: Jacqui Connelly, Ninder Singh Virk and Richard Wise

# Making a difference

**Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) allow councils to make additional payments to help people with their rent or Council Tax. Ninder Singh Virk who manages the DHP service at Coventry City Council, says it should be about more than giving short-term aid.**

DHP is available to those in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit. Here in Coventry, DHP is administered by Richard Wise in a full-time dedicated role. He has worked extremely hard, with support from

his assistant Jacqui Connelly, to ensure the smooth running of the scheme. Having a dedicated DHP post promotes continuity and consistency.

We are passionate about the success of our unit and pride ourselves on providing a valuable service. It could make the difference between someone keeping a roof over their head or facing eviction.

The value of DHP is more than just keeping people in safe and secure accommodation in the short term. It is also about helping them find ways to keep their tenancies independently of assistance through DHP.

## Some of the measures we have taken

- Fostering and maintaining effective links with statutory and voluntary organisations including working closely with landlords.
- Providing a drop-in session at a local community centre to promote and deliver DHP to vulnerable adults.
- Working with our Money Management Adviser and welfare rights team to ensure clients receive budgeting and welfare benefits advice.
- Conducting personal interviews with the large majority of DHP applicants.
- Producing leaflets to promote the DHP service.
- Conducting awareness sessions for both internal and external sections.

The economic downturn is bringing a significant increase in our caseload. We handled 568 DHP claims in 2008/09 and a full budget spend of £109,000. Caseload increased by 44% on the previous year.

We are extremely keen to be able to engage with clients at an early stage. When they are awarded a DHP, they are encouraged to improve their circumstances and are advised that a DHP is only a short-term solution. I also manage a Money Management and Welfare Rights Service. The interaction between the three services works particularly well and provides an integrated approach to promote money management skills and income maximisation.

### An email from a client endorses our dedication and commitment:

“Thank you for helping me with my rent problem. I paid all my rent arrears today. So my home is safe for now and I’m not going to get evicted and have to move somewhere I don’t want to be.”

Lesley Dunn, Benefits Service Manager adds, “The DHP fund in Coventry is an integral part of delivering a proactive and holistic benefits service which is responsive to the personal circumstances of every customer.

“Through the responsive allocation of our DHP budget we are able to provide extra assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

“Our dedicated and knowledgeable team are passionate about the services they provide to local people. They work extremely hard to ensure that we address some of the underlying causes of people’s difficulties rather than just treating the symptoms.”



### To learn more ...

If you want to know more about Coventry’s DHP Service please contact Ninder Singh Virk at [ninder.virk@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:ninder.virk@coventry.gov.uk)



☛ DHP is administered in Coventry by Richard Wise

# Changing circumstances for the better

Encouraging Housing Benefit customers to report changes in circumstances took a new turn when DWP and the London Borough of Waltham Forest launched a pilot campaign to test the power of communication in getting the message across.

The 'Tell Us Too' campaign used direct mail, outdoor posters and press advertising to urge Housing Benefit customers in the borough to report their changes in circumstances promptly. It also raised awareness of the types of change they needed to report and how they could do it.

Community organisations and businesses joined in by handing out information and displaying posters. The results showed a marked change in awareness and attitude towards the need to report changes.

Response rates to the mailings beat the 5% target and over a third of these responses generated claim reassessments. Research also showed that when it came to letting the local authority know about their changes, customers preferred to do it by post.

Helen Steadman, who led the campaign for DWP, said the results were encouraging and showed that communication can change customer behaviour.

She continued, "Waltham Forest was already proactive in encouraging its customers to report changes. Their input to the campaign and local knowledge of the community played a big part in the pilot's success.



"We will take what we've learned to steer any further work we do to tackle customer error."

Councillor Keith Rayner, Waltham Forest's Cabinet Member for Performance, Risk and Governance added, "I think this pilot proved that in many cases, benefit errors are not deliberate but are a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'.

"If local authorities can be supported like this to actively remind residents to update their details, both sides are being smarter with their money at a time when every penny counts."

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*"The results were encouraging and showed that communication can change customer behaviour."*

*Helen Steadman*

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