

October 2008

moredirect



↻ Housing Benefit review on its way

⬇ Faster, safer, secure connections

⬇ Forming effective partnerships




DWP Department for Work and Pensions

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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.

As you may already know a review of Housing Benefit is under way and the review will be considering all aspects of Housing Benefit. Read more about the review and how you can contribute on page 4.

Next month sees the introduction of a new way of helping people with an illness or disability move into work, rather than stay on benefits. Further details on the Employment and Support Allowance can be found on pages 6–7.

I would welcome any feedback 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 call me on 020 7712 2568 to discuss potential articles.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Robert Sneddon

I am very pleased to introduce this edition of **moredirect**, at this very important stage in taking forward our welfare reforms.



➔ Stephen Timms,
Minister of State
for Employment
and Welfare
Reform

We have already made real progress in addressing the most pressing problems with Housing Benefit. You have improved administration dramatically over the last five years. This is a significant achievement which deserves to be recognised.

And earlier this year we began national implementation of the Local Housing Allowance to promote personal choice and responsibility. People now have more control over where they choose to live, and how much to spend on rent. Giving people more control and independence is central to our agenda.

We are currently reviewing all aspects of Housing Benefit with Treasury colleagues. We are particularly interested in what more Housing Benefit could do to help people into work, promote financial independence, and deliver good value for money for the tax payer.

I am keen that we consider Housing Benefit reform alongside our wider programme and I look forward to working with you to help more people realise their full potential.

Clerical LAIDS to rest

As part of the drive to improve the flow of information between central and local Government, plans are under way to send Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claim information electronically to local authorities.

This will replace the current post/courier method of transfer and will improve the security of customer information.

The electronic claim information will be received by LAs the day after it is dispatched by DWP. This will improve customer service by contributing to the reduction of end-to-end processing times.

The electronic LAID will be piloted in November 2008 and be fully rolled out by March 2009. This will be followed by electronic transfer of HB/CTB claim information from The Pension Service in April 2009 and, at a date yet to be confirmed, HB/CTB claim information gathered as part of the new Employment Support Allowance new claims process.

Further guidance will be issued as the project develops.



To learn more ...

Contact janet.croll@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

A fresh look



☛ DWP members of the Housing Benefit review team

In March 2008 the Government announced a review of the Housing Benefit system as part of its Budget 2008 statement:

“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 LHA 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 review is being taken forward jointly by DWP and HMT. The team is made up of officials from the two departments and they will report to ministers towards the end of this year.

The review will look at every aspect of Housing Benefit with a special focus on the effect it has on people's

willingness to take up employment and whether the current system is delivering value for money. The review will be comprehensive and wide-ranging, covering both the structure of Housing Benefit and the way it is administered and delivered.

Although a focus is being placed on working age Housing Benefit, the review will also consider the impact of any policy proposals on pensioners. Similarly the close links between Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit will also be examined when looking at any reform proposals.

As this is an internal exercise, the review team is not actively seeking contributions from individual local authorities, but it will be collating and examining the extensive evidence and research that already exists. However, the team has set up a dedicated email address which can be used to provide any information which you feel may be relevant to the review.

? To provide useful information ...

Contact the team on
hb.evidencereview@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Keeping it simple

Local authorities, Housing Benefit Strategy Division and The Pension Service are continuing to work together to make it easier for people claiming Pension Credit over the phone to also claim Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB).

From October 2008 customers will be able to claim HB/CTB when they telephone The Pension Service to claim Pension Credit or when they phone to report a change in circumstances.

This more streamlined approach will see customer's HB/CTB claims sent directly to the local authority once Pension Credit has been assessed.

Other benefits include:

- aligning the Pension Credit, State Retirement Pension and HB/CTB claims processes so that there is no need to complete or sign a claim form when applying over the telephone
- increasing benefit take-up by ensuring 100% of claims taken alongside Pension Credit applications are sent to the local authority
- simplifying the process for local authorities so that the customer experience is enhanced, for example collecting non-dependant and child information from the first telephone call, removing the necessity for child and non-dependant supplementary forms
- where possible, reducing local authority processing times for HB/CTB pensioner claims.



The Pension Service has produced a detailed briefing pack for local authorities, which was distributed at delivery events during May and June 2008 and is available on our website.

The October 2008 changes will make it even easier for Pension Credit customers to access HB/CTB – modern, customer-focused and simpler.

? To learn more ...

See www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/working-with-dwp/pensions.asp

Incapacity Benefit is changing...

From 27 October the Government will unveil new measures designed to offer a helping hand to those unable to work due to illness or disability.

Employment and Support Allowance will replace incapacity benefits for new customers, meaning they will no longer need to apply separately for Incapacity Benefit and Income Support paid on incapacity grounds. The new allowance will offer customers a package of financial support. For those able to prepare for work, it will ensure their needs are recognised and provide them with support to help them on their path to a suitable job.

So how will it work?

The assessment phase

- A much simpler application process will mean most people will make one phone call with no initial claim forms to fill in.
- Customers who have made sufficient National Insurance contributions will be entitled to contribution-based Employment and Support Allowance.
- Those who do not have sufficient capital will receive income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

☞ Employment and Support Allowance is the new way of helping people with an illness or disability move into work



Employment and Support Allowance

Working for  a better life

- The first 13 weeks of the customer's claim will be called the 'assessment phase', during which most customers will attend a Work Capability Assessment. During this assessment, the customer will be provided with access to a healthcare professional to discuss their views about moving into work and to identify any health-related support that may help this transition.
- During the assessment phase the customer will receive a basic rate payment of up to £60.50 a week.

Ongoing support

- The importance of Employment and Support Allowance lies in supporting customers and not forcing them into jobs, or any activity which may have a negative impact on their health.
- It is recognised that some customers will have an illness or disability that in certain cases means they can never return to the workplace, and in others, will need a long recovery period before realistically considering a return to employment.
- Customers with the most severe illnesses or disabilities will enter the Support Group of Employment and Support Allowance and will not be required to actively prepare for work or undertake other return to work activity, although they can volunteer for appropriate support should they wish to do so.
- Support Group customers will receive a higher rate of Employment and Support Allowance. From week 14, the poorest customers in this group will receive £102.10 a week, and others will receive £89.50 a week.

- If the customer is able to undertake some form of work-related activity, they will enter the Work-Related Activity Group from the beginning of week 14 of their claim. Customers in this group will be supported towards employment and will attend up to six work-focused interviews to ensure they receive appropriate help and support. From week 14, this group will receive £84.50 a week.

Employment and Support Allowance will be backed by a new system which, from late 2009, will allow customer information to be sent directly to local authority computer systems by Jobcentre Plus. Prior to this, if an associated claim to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit is needed, a claim form will be issued to the customer for completion and submission to their local authority. (Separate arrangements apply in Northern Ireland.)

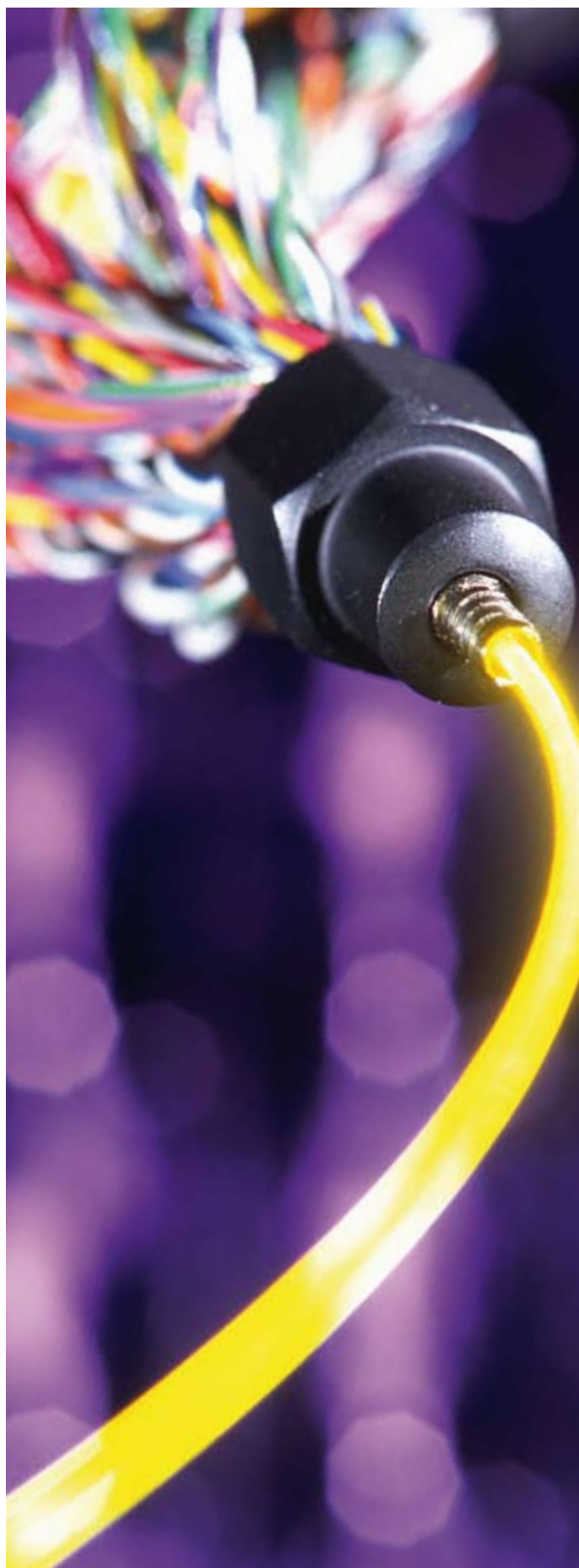


To learn more ...

Employment and Support Allowance will have a significant impact on Housing Benefit. For more detail on the changes please refer to www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/user-communications/circulars/2008/A11-2008.pdf

In Great Britain, for more information on Employment and Support Allowance, including information to help your discussions with customers, visit www.dwp.gov.uk/esa

In Northern Ireland, further information is available at www.dsdni.gov.uk/esa



Secure connections

Government Connect is changing the way DWP is delivering Housing Benefit with local authorities.

Through the partnership of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Communities and Local Government (CLG), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the local government community, a secure IT infrastructure is currently being rolled out to support better collaboration between central government departments and local authorities. This DWP-led, pan-government programme enables central government departments and local authorities to share information and services faster, safer and more effectively, bypassing post and couriers, and enabling major benefits to the public in terms of convenience and access.

Huge support

On 1 April 2008 the permanent secretaries of DWP, CLG and DCSF wrote to all local authority chief executives in England and Wales announcing the Government Connect network (GCSx) as their preferred network for data transfer between local and central government and to signal that less secure communication methods will be phased out. This announcement has resulted in huge support from the local authority community towards the goal of 100% connectivity by 31 March 2009. Scottish local authorities are already on an equivalent of GCSx called GSX. To date fewer than 50 English and Welsh local authorities do not have connections or connection requests being processed by GC. The potential of secure and trusted IT links with central government and other authorities is being recognised as a key enabler to service improvements, greater efficiency and achieving best practice for data protection.

Improving services

GC will improve the processing of Housing and Council Tax Benefit, provide better security for sensitive data on children and learners and make local government performance reporting and grant processing more efficient.

Sharing data:

- Every time a person moves in or out of work they may have to deal with their housing benefits department, Jobcentre Plus and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.
- With GC, they won't have to supply information to all three – it can be gathered by one organisation and processed simultaneously by the others. Trials show this can halve the time taken from a customer losing a job to receiving benefits.

Tell us once:

- In extreme cases one family may have to make 44 contacts when accessing government services following a bereavement.
- GC will remove bureaucratic barriers by enabling central government to upload births, deaths and marriages electronically from local government and sharing that information appropriately.

E-transfer:

- DWP plans to pass claim data to local authorities for automatic loading into benefit processing systems within 24 hours of the claim being made. Customers will be paid faster, and time and money will be saved. The almost real-time transactions will make it much harder for fraudsters to exploit the benefits system.

New DWP Data Access Policy

DWP has announced that on 31 March 2009 it will cease the provision of **restricted** data to local authorities and the receipt of sensitive personal data from local authorities through means other than government-approved secure communications channels. This policy applies to all authorities in England, Wales and Scotland where a government-approved secure communications channel can be, or has been, made available.

So what does this mean?

The major implication of this new data access policy for local authorities is that continued access to DWP secure data is now dependent upon being connected to a secure network like GCSx.

Inability to access DWP case data will have a major impact on authorities delivering Housing and Council Tax Benefit services.

Help is available

For a local authority to become connected to GCSx they need to have passed the GCSx Code of Connection (CoCo). The CoCo is a set of well-established standards for the management of information security and regarded by government as best practice.

For many authorities, meeting the CoCo will not be a significant undertaking, others will require more work to be done. To help authorities through their CoCo, GC regional account managers are providing free advice and consultancy so they are able to implement GCSx.



To learn more ...

A list of GC regional account managers can be found on the GC website at www.govconnect.gov.uk



Changes to child maintenance

Back in July 2006 a report by Sir David Henshaw, 'Recovering child support: Routes to responsibility' proposed a revamp of child maintenance arrangements. As a result the Government has introduced The Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill.

The Bill, which received Royal Assent in April, will come into force on 27 October. It includes the extension of the application of the child maintenance disregard to all payments of child maintenance, regardless of the source of that income. An increase in the child maintenance disregard was announced in the October 2007 Pre-Budget Report:

- From £15 per week to a full disregard in working age HB/CTB in October 2008 (child maintenance payments are already ignored in pension age HB/CTB).
- From £10 to £20 per week in Income Support (IS), income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA(IB)) and income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) in October 2008. This will be increased again to £40 from April 2010.

The HB/CTB child maintenance disregard measure reflects the Government's continued commitment to reduce child poverty. It aims to be easily understood and inexpensive for local authorities to administer. All child maintenance payments will be disregarded whether or not the child is currently living in the assessment unit and regardless of receipt of a family premium.

In and out of work

The In and Out of Work Pilots, run jointly between local authorities (LAs), Jobcentre Plus and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) have helped to improve processing times by up to 15%.

Currently customers who move in and out of work have to make multiple contacts with the three organisations, acting as a disincentive for customers to take up employment.

Example of success: West Lothian

Sandra Malloy, Benefit Team Leader

“The new process has brought significant improvements to the customer’s experience when claiming Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit as a result of moving in or out of work, as the information from the customer is now collected and exchanged more effectively, with these benefits being paid quicker.

“We overcame initial problems with the low level processes by holding joint practitioner workshops and operational meetings with frontline staff. By working more closely we refined and further improved the processes throughout the pilot.”



Left to right: Kim Ralston, Ryan Thomas and Kirsty Rodger, three members of the 40-strong benefit team

The pilot process has been tested successfully in six pilots across a diverse range of local authorities.

The process

Jobcentre Plus collects information not just for Jobseeker’s Allowance and Income Support, but also for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Tax Credits. This is shared via secure electronic links enabling simultaneous processing and quicker benefit payments.

Research revealed this ‘tell us once’ approach is popular with customers, over 75% saying they saw improved customer service. Customer confidence to take up short-term employment also increased.

Example of success: Liverpool

Flo Clucas, Deputy Council Leader

“What is crucial is that we find ways of helping customers back into work and support them to stay in work while still being able to claim what they’re entitled to. By joining forces and sharing information with our colleagues at DWP and HMRC we have been able to do that.

“The pilot has developed at an incredible rate and now includes electronic transfer of data between LAs, DWP and HMRC which is reducing delays even further.”



Flo Clucas

A good example

Many organisations can be involved in helping customers claim Housing and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB). Effective partnerships between councils and other organisations provide mutual benefits by saving on administrative costs and by improving the overall customer experience.

One such effective partnership is being developed at the Roberts Centre, a charity based in Portsmouth dedicated to supporting families who are striving to improve their circumstances. This joint venture with Portsmouth City Council is already showing encouraging signs of progress.

“We aim to add value to the conventional role of a council’s HB/CTB service by adopting a more proactive strategy. Since 2007 we have introduced a multi-agency approach to help tackle the problems associated with the non-payment of rent and the threat of eviction,” said Carole Damper, Manager of the Roberts Centre.

Alan Knight, Manager of Portsmouth City Council’s HB/CTB service said, “Members of my team work in partnership with the Centre to help achieve real outcomes for our customers. Although the council does

not have an obligation to offer this type of service we are proud of our contribution to helping to prevent homelessness. Working in partnership with the Centre has helped us improve the service we provide, and rather than simply concentrating on processing a claim we have all learned the bigger picture and can now relate what we do with people’s often very complicated lives. It has helped us link the role of the Benefits service with the wider, strategic objectives of the council.”

Karen Reeder, who normally works for the council’s HB/CTB service but is currently working at the Centre explains further, “I help prevent customers being evicted because of rent arrears by ensuring they receive their full entitlement to HB/CTB. Sometimes customers do not fulfil their responsibilities and so the council never receives a fully completed or evidenced claim.

“One of my key roles is to help people access other services. I have received specialist advice and support from the Centre and other appropriate agencies. As I am able to access the council’s Housing Benefit IT system from the Centre, I can easily check the status of any claim. My job is very rewarding as I am helping vulnerable people to stay in their home and therefore make a difference to their lives. I try to empower customers to manage their financial affairs independently and so maintain their tenancies.”

“If it wasn’t for Karen Reeder we would not be in our flat today and would probably have been made homeless.”

Karen and Anthony

➔ Karen Reeder, Tenant Support Officer (centre), with Anthony and Karen, customers of the Roberts Centre



Positive impact

Shirley Hudson, the council's HB/CTB policy officer has noticed an immediate impact. "The service has made real differences to some of our customers' lives. We have helped people receive their full entitlement to HB/CTB including, where appropriate, backdating payments."

Feedback from customers is also very positive. Karen and Anthony, who are joint tenants, explained, "If it wasn't for Karen Reeder we would not be in our flat today and would probably have been made homeless. Karen was brilliant and she has made a huge difference to our lives."

Overall Carole Damper is very proud of the achievements of the joint venture. "Since the service began we have helped customers receive approximately £50,000 of

HB/CTB. Not only has our work helped to reduce the stress and pressures of debt and risk of homelessness on our customers, but it has also resulted in a saving of social costs which would be incurred by other public agencies that would inevitably have been involved if court action had been taken."

? To learn more ...

Please contact Carole or Alan:

Carole Damper, 84 Crasswell Street,
Portsmouth PO1 1HT. Tel: 023 9229 6919
Email: carole.damper@robertscentre.org.uk

Alan Knight, Civic Offices, Guildhall Square,
Portsmouth PO1 2AL. Tel: 023 9284 1460
Email: alan.knight@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

Pop culture

Geoff Kent, Head of Income and ICT at Fenland District Council speaks to moredirect about how a change in attitude, hard work and the odd champagne moment have transformed the culture at Fenland.

In 2004, Fenland was an example of how not to provide best practice. New claims were processed in an average of 73 days compared with the national average of 39 days. Changes of circumstances were handled in 44 days compared with the average of 13. For 2007/08 that had changed beyond recognition. We were delivering turnaround times of 14 and 6 days respectively.

Question 1

So what changed?

What was the secret? It's all about the culture! The culture of the team and organisation is the thing that binds everyone together. New computer systems, business process re-engineering, lean thinking; these are all ways of improving performance but at Fenland we know the most important factor is staff!

Question 2

What were the main areas of focus?

It's not simply about having a cultured environment. Fenland focused on customers. They are why we exist. We opened corporate shops and a contact centre in 2005. They became 'the Council' to our customers and our service sat seamlessly behind them. This is our 'one team' approach. Customers need to get help without being passed around and 90% of all queries are resolved at the first point of contact. The key has been lots and lots of training for customer service staff, staff shadowing and our very enthusiastic and energetic training officer provision varying from sessions for up to 30 people down to one-to-one help for staff in our shops.



The team celebrating excellent 2006/07 BVPI results

Question 3

How have you delivered the service?

We took a big bang approach to change with three new computer systems (benefits, document imaging and CRM) and the front/back office split happening together (the same year as we were Council Tax capped as well). The Benefits Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) also visited us in 2005! In 2006 we realigned our service to create more processing capacity and yet we still saved money by focusing on key roles. Processing of all Housing Benefits, Council Tax Benefits, Council Tax, Business Rates and other debts were concentrated into one team with other teams focusing on preventing fraud, visiting customers and keeping our computer systems in order.

Question 4

How has this impacted on your staff?

Staff are our most important asset. Our service area piloted a relaxation of flexitime rules back in 2006, allowing staff to start the day earlier so they could finish at 3pm and have time outside work, as well as

up to two days off per month. It sounds simple but it's important. Information is also critical. Four years ago, the DWP probably knew more about our performance than many staff did. Now, we publish figures weekly and plaster them around the offices as well as keeping directors and councillors up to date. We started publishing a monthly newsletter for our service area where managers report not just their team's performance but also the lighter aspects of life. The fact is staff need to know how they are doing and how to make a difference to the customer and there is never too much information!

Question 5

What are the rewards?

We have had a corporate staff awards scheme for three years and our Delivery team has won the annual award the last two of them. The opportunity to take part in the annual awards dinner is the highlight of the year for deserving staff. We also take the opportunity to celebrate in other ways. These include writing 'thank you' letters where colleagues have gone 'beyond the call of duty' and impromptu opening of champagne to celebrate excellent results.

"The culture of the team and organisation is the thing that binds everyone together."

Geoff Kent

Thanking the team is part of the daily job, not just a one-off event. Our managers help to nurture and develop staff, leading them into challenges but standing back afterwards and allowing the whole team to take the credit for success. But managers must be self-aware, obsessed with customer service and staff development, constantly selling the service and never standing still.

Question 6

What's the next step?

Performance is excellent, staff morale the same. We are now focusing on getting more customers onto benefit, making ourselves even more accessible and always thinking about the next challenge!

☛ Left to right: John Bradshaw – Support Services Manager, Carole Cracknell – Delivery Manager, Stephen Beacher – ICT Manager, Geoff Kent – Head of Income and ICT, Martyn Wardle – Compliance Manager



Improving performance

At Bristol City Council a robust assessment of performance and procedures in benefits management has led to dramatic improvements. Di Jolliffe, Benefit Manager explains:

“Our performance on appeals work was extremely poor with backlogs and delays the norm. It was obvious that improvement was essential. The difficulty was establishing the cause of poor performance and how to improve it. I decided to ask the DWP Performance Development Team (PDT) to help us identify the problems. The PDT responded quickly, fully discussing the appeals process and the reasons for poor performance with the management team and staff. The PDT visited us for a couple of days every few weeks to monitor our progress, review work undertaken, facilitate workshops and initiate our improvement plan.”

The improvement plan included:

- full analysis and date profile of outstanding appeals work
- stripping down the appeals process and developing a more efficient model

- restructuring the appeals team so that it supported rather than hindered the process
- ring-fencing old work and initiating a backlog plan
- identifying common errors that were generating appeals
- making appeal literature more customer-friendly.

Getting results

“We could not be happier with the outcome. We have addressed our poor performance – the number of outstanding appeals reduced, with unactioned cases no more than five days old.”

Other benefits included:

- reorganising the staffing structure on appeals to make it more efficient
- changing the management information collected to ensure better control
- introducing a training programme
- helping customers to differentiate between an appeal and a request for reconsideration.

“It was hard work and there were difficult decisions along the way but without these, and the PDT support, we would not have moved forward.”

? To learn more ...

Please contact Suzanne Wigmore at suzanne.wigmore@bristol.gov.uk, or if you would like help from the PDT contact Cheryl Weaver at cheryl.weaver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Need help to improve efficiency? Visit www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit