

DWP Managing Housing Benefit Error – Guide for Assessors

Overview for Managers

Introduction

In 2005/6, £770 million of Housing Benefit was overpaid in total.

- £440 million (57%) was due to customer error
- £190 million (25%) was due to official error
- £140 million (18%) was due to fraud

These figures show that error is clearly the major cause of overpayments and that steps need to be taken to address it. This learning is one of the ways in which DWP are helping to reduce the problem – by helping your team to work smarter and change customer behaviour.

As a manager, it is important that you have an understanding of the advice and ideas presented within this learning, as your team may wish to discuss some of the issues it raises with you. This document will give you an overview of the Guide for Assessors. Having some familiarity with the learning will enable you to stay informed and help your team more effectively.

We recognise that every local authority administers Housing Benefit differently and that some of the learning may not precisely reflect your own authority's processes. However, local authorities have been involved in the development of this Guide, ensuring the learning is firmly based on the real issues facing you and your team.

The learning focuses on straightforward measures individuals can take, giving assessors tools that can have a real impact on the amount of error in their caseload and the quality of service they provide. Not only will it help reduce error, but your team will spend less time re-working claims, recovering overpayments and dealing with frustrated customers.

Overview of the learning

The learning aims to reduce overpayments by focussing on the most widespread mistakes that are made both by customers and by benefit staff. The most common errors are made in the following areas, which are all covered within the learning:

Customer error:

- Non-residence
- Earnings
- Tax credits
- Household makeup
- Other income or benefits

Official error:

- Rent
- Capital
- Income
- Passporting benefits

The learning comprises a number of tutorials which contain a mixture of presentation screens and questions around a specific topic. There are also scenarios, where users work through the kind of situation they may encounter in their jobs, and apply the skills and ideas they have learned from the tutorials to prevent error and provide excellent customer service.

Key ideas in the learning

The learning covers a broad scope of situations and issues that assessors are likely to have to deal with in their jobs. There are a number of key ideas and best practice guidelines that the learning emphasises in some or all of these areas.

As a manager, you can help by understanding the issues, supporting your staff, promoting these practices and ensuring your team have adequate training. Some of the key ideas are outlined below.

Right first time – the importance of the first contact with customers

Throughout the learning, the importance of good first contact with a customer is emphasised. A successful first contact can minimise the potential for problems later in the claim through gathering comprehensive information and checking that customers understand their responsibilities. Learners are encouraged to:

- take complete details from customers
- ensure customers fully understand the questions on the claim form
- be polite and friendly so that customers are not put off approaching the council in the future
- make sure customers understand what verification they need to provide

- make sure customers understand what changes they need to report and how important it is that they report changes of circumstance
- make diary notes of potential changes

As a manager, you can support your staff by encouraging these behaviours and accepting that the initial stage of a claim may take a little longer as a result.

Encouraging customers to report changes of circumstance

Customers failing to report changes is one of the biggest causes of error, so one of the main focuses of the learning is to influence and educate customers to report changes. They need to know:

- what changes they must report
- who to report changes to
- why reporting changes is so important

Whilst we accept that it is the responsibility of customers to report changes, learners are encouraged to take every opportunity to:

- check customers' understanding of what they must report
- remind customers to report changes

Thinking ahead – identifying error before it occurs

As well as encouraging customers to report changes of circumstance, learners are prompted to keep an eye out for potential changes in a claim and get into the habit of using a diary system to help keep claims up-to-date and correct. They are encouraged to:

- think ahead when dealing with customers and identify probable changes
- make diary notes to return to claims where a change is likely
- make clear notes so that anyone else working on the claim can understand and action them

Different local authorities use different diary systems, so this learning does not address the specifics of using the diary system. You need to make sure your team know how to use the system you have, and understand its value. Some staff may need further training in this area.

Communicating clearly

One reason that customers fail to report changes or make mistakes on their claim is a failure to understand our communications with them.

Throughout the learning, learners are encouraged to consider the advantages of using the phone to communicate with customers, rather than writing letters. Using the phone:

- is a less formal way of communicating with customers
- allows assessors to check that customers understand what they are being asked for
- is a quicker way of communicating than by letter

Learners are also encouraged to take customers' mobile phone numbers so people can be contacted during working hours and texted with reminders.

Although the learning promotes the use of the telephone rather than writing letters, there is also advice about improving the clarity of written communication, with the emphasis on avoiding jargon and writing in a clear, uncomplicated style.

As a manager, you can help in this area by promoting the use of the telephone and reviewing any letter templates that you use on a regular basis, to make sure that they are easy to understand.

Effective use of resources

Users are encouraged to make use of the resources that are available to them, especially the Customer Information System (CIS). Although this learning does not go into detail about how to use CIS, it gives an overview of what it can be used for and directs users to the full e-learning on CIS that DWP provides.

This is an area where your team may have training needs, so you should make sure that they understand what CIS can be used for, recognise its value and are able to use it effectively.

How to use this package

We suggest that everyone reads the information in the “Help” section before embarking on the learning, as this explains how to navigate through the learning. Learners can work through tutorials and scenarios at their own pace, and can see at a glance whenever they log on which ones they have already completed. They can also use the package for reference, either to dip into modules they have worked through, or to access the resources listed at the bottom of every screen.

We will be adding further learning for managers which covers issues such as workflow management, and we will update the learning periodically to reflect legislation changes.

Appendix: The structure of the learning

The learning is divided into four broad headings containing the tutorials and scenarios listed below:

Title		Description
How much do you already know?		
Quiz		This section takes the form of a short quiz to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discover what the learner knows • think about the ideas covered in the learning • decide what areas they may want to focus on
Overview of the problem		
Tutorial:	What's the problem?	An overview of the problem of Housing Benefit error and why it's important to reduce it.
Tutorial:	Encouraging customers to report changes	This tutorial outlines the importance of customers reporting changes of circumstance and ways of encouraging them to do so.
Tutorial:	Communicating with customers	This tutorial considers how the way in which assessors communicate with customers can encourage them to report changes.
Mistakes our customers make		
Scenario:	A new applicant	Learners encounter a new applicant, gather information for the claim and make the most of this first contact.
Tutorial:	First impressions	This tutorial focuses on the importance of creating a good impression of the council and the benefit service.
Scenario:	A home visit	Learners visit a customer at home and must gather complete and relevant information.
Tutorial:	Getting the most out of visiting	This tutorial deals with non-residence and how to get the most out of home visits.
Tutorial:	Avoiding jargon	This tutorial covers the importance of clear communication both with customers and with colleagues.
Mistakes we make		
Scenario:	Partner just left	Learners take a telephone call from a customer whose circumstances have just changed and who needs advice on her benefit entitlement.
Tutorial:	Using your judgement	This tutorial outlines using your judgement to get the correct information in the most efficient way.
Tutorial:	Thinking ahead	This tutorial emphasises the importance of being proactive and anticipating possible overpayments before they occur.
Tutorial:	Using resources	This tutorial describes some of the resources

		available to assessors such as CIS and resources provided by DWP.
Scenario:	Which case?	Learners have to recognise cases in which changes of circumstance are most likely, and respond effectively.
Tutorial:	Recognising risk	This tutorial gives details of what the most likely changes are, and which groups are most likely to have a change of circumstance.
Tutorial:	Gathering and inputting data	This tutorial focuses on eliminating official error by cutting down mistakes in inputting and calculating.
Tutorial:	Making notes	This tutorial focuses on the value of keeping notes so that anyone who picks up a case can work on it effectively.