

Practitioners Operational Group (POG) Meeting
Wednesday 21st January 2009
CIPFA Building, Robert Street London WC2N

Minutes

Attendees:

Danielle Wells	DWP HBSD (Chairperson)
Sabby Mahal-Riordan	DWP HBSD (Secretariat)
Ben Aylott	DWP HBSD
David Wright	DWP HBSD
Tony Withers	DWP HBSD
James Boyd	DWP PDCS
Anna Smith	DWP Government Connect
Chris Bullen	Jobcentre Plus Partnerships
Heather Neate	Audit Commission
Gary Trent	DWP Rent Service
Gary Bartlett	Rent Service (Wales)
Lesley Pigott	LB Camden/LGA/Steering Group Representative
Judith Johnson	Cherwell DC/LGA
Lyn Sutherland	LB Barnet
Jane McManus	Leeds City Council
Mark Underwood	LB Bexley
Frankie Cartwright	South Staffordshire Council
Pamela Richardson	Gateshead Council
Alan Sinclair	City of Edinburgh Council/COSLA
David Collier	Birmingham City Council

Apologies:

Alison McGrory (Solihull), Gwyn Thomas (Westminster), Paul Ellary (Kensington & Chelsea), Julie Holden (Tandridge) and Michelle Charles (Debt Management).

1. Minutes/Action Points/Matters Arising

Minutes

In reference to the agenda item relating to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), LA representatives requested that an example of what exceptional circumstances would be that would allow an authority to restrict the amount of benefit payable, be circulated to POG members and be treated as an action point.

Danielle Wells confirmed that an example had been circulated to Lesley Piggott and she would arrange for this example to be circulated to all POG members.

Action Point 01/01/09: Danielle Wells to circulate an example of exceptional circumstances to POG members.

LA representatives also highlighted couple of typing errors on page 8 and the POG secretary confirmed she would make the appropriate corrections.

Action Points

Action point 03/05/08: Persons from Abroad (PFA) – to issue guidance on the latest amendments as soon as possible.

LA representatives would like to see copies of the training notes on the latest PFA guidance as suggested at the December POG meeting, as soon as possible.

2. Rent Service Update (England)

Gary Trent provided the following update on the Rent Service (England) based on papers circulated prior to the meeting:

Churn Rates

- The Housing Benefit (HB) churn rate rose to 57.3% in November but fell back to 41.35% in December.
- The Year To Date (YTD) churn rate as of the end December 2008 stood at 37.21% and we are on target for the estimated year one reduction of around 40%.

Re-determinations

- The new localities to reflect the Heffernan judgement were completed on schedule by 22nd December 2008
- A collaborative effort from the Review Teams and Rent Officers responsible for re-determination meant that the new Local Reference Rents (LRRs) were determined and the majority of the outstanding re-determinations cleared in December.
- The new Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMAs) that follow the principles set out in the House of Lords' judgement will be applied to all determinations which Rent Officers make on cases with a relevant date before 5 January 2009. This includes re-determinations and substitutes.

New Order

- The Rent Officers (Housing Benefit Functions) Amendment (No 2) Order 2008 came into effect from 5th January 2009
- The Order introduced changes to the way that Rent Officers determine BRMA under LRR and LHA schemes.

Rent Service - Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

There are 2 SLAs, one for this year and one for next year, and LA representatives provided the following comments on both SLAs:

- The SLA for next year still refers to larger property categories
- Clarity was required on the target figures as there is a target for 94% and the next target is 95%. Surely the next target should be 100%
- Monitoring performance on a quarterly basis maybe a bit excessive, perhaps 6 months would be more practical.
- It may be better to highlight the presence of the SLAs more effectively so LA staff are more aware of their existence.

Gary Trent noted the feedback and comments on the SLAs.

3. The Rent Service Update (Wales)

Gary Bartlett provided the following update from Wales based on the papers circulated prior to the meeting:

- The numbers of HB subsidy cases being referred to the Rent Officers Wales continue to be a reduced level in comparison to the same periods last year
- Rent Service (Wales) continue to monitor the levels of HB referrals on weekly basis and information on trends was circulated prior to the meeting
- Rent Service (Wales) hope to be in position to notify POG members in February/March on the timetable for the review of BRMAs.

4. The Pension Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) Update

Jim Boyd provided the following update:

- In his Pre-Budget Report, the Chancellor made clear that the Government would maintain the level of support for mortgage interest at 6.08% for six months. Some customers would experience a temporary drop below 6.08% because DWP IT systems normally “track” the Bank of England base rate and that general rule had automatically kicked in to reduce rates from 6 November. This would have knock-on effects for CTB claims. Full guidance on this including action to take on specific cases, was issued to local authorities in Circular U3/2008.
- DWP is taking action to compensate those customers whose benefit had been reduced due to above. This would involve paying a higher rate of benefit from 02/02/09 to 08/03/09 (5 weeks) using an inflated SIR of 8.18%. This would mean that SIR will have been, on average, 6.08% average for the period 15/12/08 to 08/03/09, in line with the Chancellor’s commitment. From 09/03/09, the cases would be readjusted to ensure that SIR is at 6.08% until further notice.
- At the very maximum 4,000 cases would have either come off IS or SPC or ceased to get the guarantee element of SPC as a result of the reduction in SMI. So far, PDCS has identified 1,500 cases and has passed details to local authorities. Work was continuing to identify further cases.
- Around 20,000 savings credit only cases would be most directly affected by the corrective action in February, as ETDs would be produced at the start and end of the adjustment period. Cases where there was a variation in either IS or the guarantee element of Pension Credit would not have an impact on CTB.

- PDCS had experienced very little in the way of increased telephone traffic following the reduction in SPC in December, but there was an increased risk of higher volumes as benefit was adjusted at the start and end of the compensation period.
- Full details on the compensation period, including action needed on CTB cases and lines to take were in Circular HB/CTB G1/2009 issued on 15 January 2009. PDCS staff had been issued with similar lines to take.
- There was a further issue in that the SPC up-rating scan was run between Christmas and the New Year (prior to the action taken to increase benefit from February). It was possible therefore that the up-rating scan would have taken a small number of cases off benefit from April 2009 when it should not have done so. PDCS was taking urgent action to identify these cases and restore SPC to its correct amount.
- LA representatives welcomed the above update, however, some LA representatives highlighted that in reference to CTB they might have cases on savings credit but now maybe on guaranteed credit and as LAs did not have access to mortgage interest this would be a problem.
- Jim Boyd, noted the above concern, but confirmed that before the Housing Costs review is started from 15th March there was not a lot that could be done.

5. Jobcentre Plus Update

Chris Bullen provided the following update:

- The current economic situation has impacted on the number of claims received and measures have been put in place to deal with the increased caseload
- Jobcentre had received a reasonable number of staff volunteers from other Government Departments
- They had received funding to recruit a further 6,000 staff in the next couple of years
- They had extended Rapid Reclaims from 13 weeks to 26 weeks
- Offering Rapid Response Services with employers with up to 20 people
- They had given District Managers more flexibility around the number of services they provide
- Increasing employer engagement through local employer partnerships

- Rolling out In and Out of Work pilots

LA representatives welcomed the update.

6. Employment Service Allowance (ESA) Update

Ben Aylott provided the following update on ESA:

- The link to ESA Operational Guidance had been re-advertised in a General Bulletin
- Release 1.2 was still scheduled for an October delivery and under the integrated claim Jobcentre Plus will gather information for HB/CTB. Housing Benefit Strategy staff had been involved in the ESA Jobcentre Plus testing of this service.
- LAs would be invited to attend seminars in June 2009 to discuss the forthcoming changes in October and DWP would provide further information on when and where these seminars would be held.
- DWP was still trying to resolve the legal position of “better off” in reference to which partner should be claiming where disability premium was involved

7. Employee Authentication Service Presentation

David Wright conducted an electronic presentation on the Employee Authentication Service (EAS), which looked at the business and technical context of data sharing, the current position on authentication and authorisation for access to CIS and the EAS Solution. (See Electronic Presentation)

LA representatives felt that in light of other activity in relation to Government Connect, the CoCo and access to CIS, it would be best to hold an ad-hoc technical POG meeting to discuss the impact of EAS and how it sits with other technical requirements in more detail.

Action Point 02/01/09: DWP representatives to set up an ad-hoc technical POG meeting to discuss the EAS in more detail.

8. Government Connect Update

Anna Smith provided the following update on Government Connect:

- 23 LAs were Government Connect Compliant, 19 LAs were pending approval and 328 LAs were in the formal assessment process.
- Government Connect had written to 9 LAs who had not submitted a formal assessment and there was no exemption in place.
- No exemptions had been granted on Costs
- Once CoCo approval was received LAs should be able to get GSCX connection within 20 minutes. If connection was not live they would be offered support through an engineer.
- Government Connect Team were providing support by liaising with LAs to talk through their assessments and it is important that LAs continue to forward assessments
- LAs would be allocated a Data Transport Application (DTA) dedicated server which would manage incoming and outgoing data. Government Connect would help with installation and would be writing to LAs at the beginning of week commencing 26 January about installing DTA.
- Government Connect would ensure that a copy of the letter went to Benefit Managers and that they use the most up to date contact list for Benefit Managers.

LA representatives wondered if there was enough time to be ready by end of March and whether LAs could get an extension if not enough support was available.

9. AOB

Customer Management System (CMS)

Jane McManus stated that the CMS script did not help with protection on death and 13 week protection and did not give a full picture on the requirement for all addresses that the customer had held within 52 week period prior to the claim.

She asked whether, the CMS script could be reviewed.

Action Point 03/01/09: Can the CMS script be reviewed to include further questions about past addresses.

Subsidy Rules on Temporary Accommodation

LA representatives asked when details on the new subsidy rules on temporary accommodation would be circulated. Danielle explained that she expected new arrangements to be circulated in the future, once Ministers had given them their blessing.

The next POG meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 25th February 2009