

Practitioners Operational Group (POG) Meeting  
Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2009  
At  
CIPFA, Robert Street WC2N

Minutes

**Attendees:**

Danielle Wells	DWP HBSD (Chairperson)
Sabby Mahal-Riordan	DWP HBSD (Secretariat)
David Wright	DWP HBSD
Lynne Isaacson	DWP HBSD
John Hyde	DWP HRAD
Joseph Stacey	DWP HBSD
Amanda Elias	DWP HBSD
Janet Croll	DWP HBSD
Fergal O'Kane	DWP HRAD
Katie Dodd	DWP IFD
Jacqui Gaynor	DWP IFD
Fiona Mcleish	PDCS
Tim Savill	Audit Commission
Gary Trent	VOA (England)
Karl Thomas	Rent Office Wales
Lesley Pigott	LB Camden/LGA/Steering Group Representative
Gwyn Thomas	Westminster City Council/ London Councils
Judith Johnson	Cherwell District Council/LGA
Lyn Sutherland	LB Barnet/LGA
Paul Ellary	LB Kensington & Chelsea
Frankie Cartwright	South Staffordshire Council
David Collier	Birmingham City Council
Pam Richardson	Gateshead Council
Margo Hodgens	Glasgow City Council/COSLA
Alison McGrory	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

**Apologies:**

Julie Holden (Tandridge), Jane McManus (Leeds), Mark Underwood (Bexley), Marion Smith (West- Dunbarton), Jim Todd (Rent Office Scotland), Michelle Charles (Debt Management) and Chris Bullen (Jobcentre Plus).

## **1. Minutes/Action Points/Matters Arising**

### Minutes

LAA representatives felt that there was a missing action point from the minutes relating to postcode information from the VOA (England).

Gary Trent (VOA) confirmed he would cover this action point in his update.

### Action Point Log

Action Point 01/04/09: To circulate the latest guidance on Persons from Abroad (PFA) via General Bulletin.

LAA representatives would like this action point to go under the previous action point number of 03/05/08 as it is a continuation of the same action point. They also asked for this action point to be progressed as a matter of urgency given the time that had already elapsed.

LAA representatives confirmed that action point 02/05/09: What is the time taken to process as part of the subsidy claim for 2008/09, was incorrectly worded. This actually referred to national indicators.

Tim Savill from the Audit Commission confirmed that the Audit Commission had no plans to audit for quality on National Indicators and therefore no data on quality work would be published.

## **2. Supported Exempt Accommodation**

Lynne Isaacson introduced this item based on the paper circulated prior to the meeting:

### Background

- It has been widely recognised that there was a need to re-examine the rules around the level of help available towards the rent of those who live in specialist supported accommodation provided by landlords in the social and voluntary sector.
- Such accommodation included group homes, hostels and refuges, sheltered housing, supported living complexes and adapted housing for the disabled provided by housing associations, registered charities, voluntary organisations and county councils.
- The rules affected the level of Housing Benefit (HB) available to groups that include those who were elderly, those with mental and physical and learning disabilities, substance abuses and the homeless.

- Currently the rules on supported exempt accommodation provided for the full subsidy up to the rent officer's determination and partial subsidy above that. This was not always effective in ensuring that HB met any reasonable costs associated with such accommodation and that LAs were not faced with meeting significant shortfalls in subsidy.
- Whilst we have a wealth of anecdotal evidence from LAs there was limited information available to establish a baseline against which the outcomes of any proposals could be measured. In particular we needed to understand how much we spent on HB subsidy for this particular accommodation and how many people currently accessed HB under these rules.

### Proposals

- Proposing to send a questionnaire to a number of LAs whom we know deal with a quantity of HB claims from those in supported accommodation.
- We would like LAs to tell us what type of information they do keep eg; numbers of providers and number of claims.
- We also need details on the providers so we can approach them directly to establish the various forms of accommodation and what exactly makes them more expensive.
- At some point we would also welcome expert input from LA staff involved in the day to day assessment and administration of these cases into the development of any changes
- We propose to publicise this questionnaire through HB Direct.

LA representatives welcomed the proposals and agreed with a questionnaire being circulated via HB Direct. However, they also recommended that any changes should be discussed within POG well in advance.

### **3. Valuation Office Agency (VOA) England**

Gary Trent provided the following update:

#### Postcode Files

- VOA was unable to provide actual postcode files, however they can give you an indication of any changes but anything definitive.
- Postcode changes were effective from 1<sup>st</sup> August , but we cannot produce any information yet

LA representatives felt that they did not have enough time to prepare for the postcode changes and they needed the information to do a test run before the actual changes kick in to ensure that software specifications were in place.

Gary noted the concerns raised and acknowledged that some software providers had not yet confirmed that their products met the specification to deal with changes to BRMAs. However, it had always been the case that BRMA boundaries and postcodes would change from time to time and that software supplier systems would need to accommodate those changes. A particular issue was raised about Northgate. It was subsequently discovered that Northgate do not anticipate issues but wished to do some testing before confirming.

### Key Performance Indicators

- All year to date figures were above or on target up to the end of May.

### BRMAs

- The first 14 BRMA reviews that commenced on 5<sup>th</sup> January were now reaching a conclusion. Final decisions had been reached on 8 and the first notices of determination were issued early in June.
- The London reviews had been delayed as some of the LAs consulted required further information about how other affected BRMAs remained compliant with the Order. York, Gloucester and East Lancashire required some further work before being approved for implementation. Determinations were not expected until July.
- The full BRMA programme for the year would be published on [www.voa.gov.uk](http://www.voa.gov.uk)

### Residual IT issues affecting VICTER-eis and LHA production

- The technical issues identified with VICTER-eis and discussed at the May POG meeting were resolved on 5<sup>th</sup> June.
- As requested by POG a summary of the issue experienced with the June LHA and BRMA file production and distribution were set out in Annex C in the VOA update papers circulated prior to the meeting
- The July LHA and BRMA files were published and distributed on time, within the statutory window.

**Action Point 01/06/09: Gary Trent to establish what is the purpose of requesting information on landlords on Victor-eis.**

## Sounding Board

- The first LA Sounding Board took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, the following 7 LAs attended:

Martin O'Neill	Birmingham City Council
Tim Fisher	LB Haringey
Jane McManus	Leeds City Council
Sue Watts	South Norfolk Council
Nick Harris	Teignbridge District Council
Gwyn Thomas	Westminster City Council
John Madden	York City Council

- The focus for the first meeting was the draft BRMA review protocols, effectively the arrangements for our engagement with the LAs and stakeholders during each review. ( Please see VOA update papers for further details)
- We plan to have the BRMA review protocols finalised by the end of June and they would be copied to POG.

**Action Point 02/06/09: Gary Trent to circulate guidance to remind various stakeholders on the procedure when dealing with Board and lodgings.**

## Rent Office Wales Update

Karl Thomas provided the following update:

- BRMA Reviews were on-going in Wales.
- The number of HB subsidy cases being referred to Rent Office Wales continued to be at reduced level in comparison to the same period of 2007-08

## **4. Employee Authentication Service (EAS)**

David Wright conducted the following an electronic presentation on EAS and the requirements for the National Register paper circulated prior to the meeting

### Background

- EAS a cross-government solution that provides a scalable, sustainable and secure “two factor” authentication service.
- It enables Local government employees and trusted partners access (where authorised) multiple Government services through a single

authentication process and using a secure access token unique to each user.

#### Requirement for the National Registration Paper

- The purpose of the paper was to lay out the options and suggest a preferred option for the establishment of a national registration authority that can be used to register and enrol current and future CIS users onto the EAS secure authentication system.

LAA representatives welcomed the EAS presentation and confirmed that after reviewing the National Registration paper that they were happy with option one, which was the LA Agent model and would consist of a virtual RA with a central hub situated within DWP and 'splinter RAs' situated in each member LA.

### **5. Pension and Disability Carer's Service (PDCS)**

Fiona Mcleish provided the following performance update from PDCS:

#### Pension Credit

New claims clearance time 2 to 39 days with average 15:26 days

Change of circumstance clearance average is 5:43 days

Outstanding claims 36,896

#### Retirement Pension

New claims clearance average 14 days

Change of circumstance clearance average 9 days

Outstanding claims 76,367 (includes advance claims)

#### Take-up Campaign

- Angela Eagle had recently kicked off a Pensions Credit HB/CTB take-up campaign in North East England, so this could lead to a possible increase in HB/CTB cases.
- The previous Rosie Winterton CTB campaign where letters were sent to LA Chief Executives PDCS was not expecting a scan return back until September.

LA representatives welcomed the update and suggested it would be good to establish how successful the take up scan was which was scheduled in September.

## **6. E-Transfer Project Update**

Janet Croll provided the following update-transfer:

- The aim of the project was to replace clerical transfer data with electronic transfers and LAs have to have live GSCX access for this to occur.
- 10 LAs already gone live and were using e-transfer and a further DTA installation to take place 13<sup>th</sup> June and 7<sup>th</sup> July for 28 LAs.
- There is a 3 week period from DTA installation to test out installation in order to allow time for preparation.
- The PDSC LACI is coming on board in July and if all is well aiming to go live on 27<sup>th</sup> July.

LA representatives acknowledged the E-transfer update but requested clarity on whether the E-transfer project team would be liaising with individual LAs when they came online to ensure they were still able to do so on the agreed date.

Janet Croll confirmed that changes could be made in exceptional circumstances and requests would be considered on a case by case basis.

Finally, Janet confirmed that a General Bulletin would be issued once the DTA had been installed and this Bulletin would provide a contact for LAs to establish what their e-enablement date would be.

## **7. Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE) Update**

Jacqui Gaynor and Katie Dodd provided the following SHBE Update:

### General

- Currently receiving data from all LAs but 4.
- HBMS switch off for 234 LAs and HBMS extract had been de-commissioned in 98% therefore phase one was on target.
- HBMS phase two – 169 LAs were preparing for relevant software release.

LA representatives welcomed the general update but requested clarity as to whether LAs were happy when the HBMS was switched off.

Jacqui Gaynor confirmed that she had not heard anything from LAs to say whether they were happy or not.

**Action Point 03/06/09: Jacqui Gaynor to establish whether LAs were happy with HBMS switch-off.**

Quality Assurance

- The Department was hoping to release caseload information in August 2009; this information would cover the period from November 2008 to May 2009.
- The Department was looking to make comparisons with previous year and would not publish any information that was dubious and incorrect.
- SHBE Team would be speaking with LAs who may have specific issues on caseload returns, in order to establish if they were software issues and aim to work with LAs to rectify any problems.
- The SHBE Team had already started a dialogue with software providers.

LA representatives welcomed the SHBE update, however they felt it was important to establish clarity on what the underlying problems were for example were they software problems or DWP problems.

LA representatives felt it was encouraging that the Department had started a dialogue with the software providers, but also highlighted the fact that software providers may charge LAs for interrogating the SHBE data.

Finally, LA representatives asked how quickly would the SHBE be published.

Katie Dodd confirmed 3 months after the reference point.

**Action Point 04/06/09: Katie Dodd to establish why the Right Benefit Indicators for April on HoBoD show a 1,000 case difference between 2008/09 and 2009/10**

**8. Jobcentre Plus Update**

Chris Bullen was absent but subsequently provided an update. The documents are being circulated with these minutes.

LA representatives recently attended an ESA Jobcentre Plus exercise in Glasgow and under matching it was established that there was a high figures (50%) where the claims did not have the right yes/no indicator set on them.

**Action Point 05/06/09: Chris Bullen to look into the matter and establish if the not having the right indicators to this extent is a localised problem or national problem and what the solutions might be.**

## 9. Temporary Accommodation

LA representatives referred to the paper that had been circulated to software providers on temporary accommodation. They felt that full discussions on the operational implications should start now in order to be ready for the changes in April 2010. The main areas that LA representatives felt further consideration was required were on

- Need to collect data on number of rooms.
- LAs would be placing people in temporary accommodation outside their BRMAs.
- Splitting categories - LAs do not keep information on self contained and non self contained accommodation.
- Other software issues.

Danielle Wells suggested that it might be helpful to hold a POG meeting which would focus specifically on temporary accommodation.

Since the meeting a temporary accommodation workshop/ad-hoc POG has been arranged for Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> July.

## 10. AOB

### Child Benefit Changes

**Action Point 06/06/09: What is the Department doing to publicise nationally the recent Child Benefit disregard changes? When were the regulations to the Child Benefit disregards going to be circulated?**

### HB Review

LA representatives wanted to know when the HB Review consultation document was going to be published.

Danielle Wells confirmed that due to a complete ministerial change, both Yvette Cooper (Secretary of State) and Helen Goodman (HB Minister) needed more time to think about this, so it could be delayed until after the summer recess.

**The POG meeting scheduled for 29<sup>th</sup> July has been cancelled. The next formal POG meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009.**