

Practitioners Operational Group Meeting
25th February 2009
CIPFA Robert Street

Minutes

Attendees:

Danielle Wells	DWP HBSD (Chairperson)
Sabby Mahal-Riordan	DWP HBSD (Secretariat)
Ben Aylott	DWP HBSD
Brian Brighthouse	DWP HBSD
Jackie Daly	DWP HBSD
Joseph Stacey	DWP HBSD
Cheryl Weaver	DWP LAPD
James Boyd	DWP PDCS
Chris Bullen	Jobcentre Plus Partnership
John Southworth	DWP Information Directorate
Leanne Barrot	DWP Information Directorate
Barbara Horton	DWP
Ursula Brennan	DWP
Gary Trent	Rent Service
Michelle Charles	DWP Debt Management
Chris Jones	DWP Debt Management
Heather Neate	Audit Commission
Lesley Pigott	LB Camden/LGA/Steering Group Representatives
Alison McGrory	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Frankie Cartwright	South Staffordshire Council
Pamela Richardson	Gateshead Council
Lyn Sutherland	LB Barnet/LGA
Judith Johnson	Cherwell District Council/LGA
Julie Holden	Tandridge District Council/LGA
Jane McManus	Leeds City Council
Alan Sinclair	City of Edinburgh Council/ COSLA
Margo Hodgens	Glasgow City Council/COSLA
Mark Underwood	LB Bexley/London Councils
Paul Ellary	LB Kensington & Chelsea
Gwyn Thomas	Westminster City Council/London Councils

Apologies:

David Collier (Birmingham City Council), Karl Thomas (Rent Service Wales) and Marion Smith (West Dunbarton)

1. Minutes/Action Points/Matters Arising

Minutes

No comments.

Action Point Log

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

Ursula Brennan confirmed that she had typed up her personal notes and would review them before circulating them to POG members on 1st April 2009

Action point 01/01/09: To circulate an example of exceptional circumstances to POG members.

LA representatives felt that the example of exceptional circumstances under Local Housing Allowance (LHA) which had been circulated was not a very good example as it raised more questions than it answered.

Danielle Wells noted the comments made.

Action point 03/01/09: Can the Customer Management System (CMS) script be reviewed to include further questions about past addresses.

Brian Brighthouse referred to the paper circulated prior to the meeting by Beverley Winnermore and confirmed that the requested change would be added to the change register, but due to a busy schedule it was difficult to stipulate when this would be actioned.

Brian also wanted to establish the volume for this change and what was driving it.

LA representatives confirmed that the economic downturn was driving the volume and that was the reason why a request had been made to update the CMS script.

2. Temporary Accommodation – Direct Payments

Joseph Stacey confirmed that:

- Ministers had asked DWP Officials to test out the impact of direct payments to customers living in temporary accommodation.

- DWP proposed to do this through some small-scale trials working in partnership with volunteer Local Authorities (LAs) and Housing Associations.
- The trials were intended to explore the potential for Housing Benefit (HB) payments to support customers in terms of raising financial awareness/personal responsibility, improving budgeting skills and helping to make customers ready for possible moves into the private rented sector and/or employment.
- The trials would also help to identify any potential risks to LAs and customers, financial or otherwise.
- No decision to extend direct payments across a wider pool of temporary accommodation customers would be made without there first being a thorough and independent evaluation of the trials.
- DWP is currently seeking expressions of interests from LAs and Housing Associations who may wish to work with us to develop and ultimately deliver the trials.
- DWP next steps are to circulate a paper for prospective participants.

LA representatives were disappointed that initial papers relating to Direct Payments for temporary accommodation trials had gone out without consulting POG beforehand. Concerns were also raised on the feasibility of making direct payments on temporary accommodation in relation to the legislation, administration and software implications

Joe apologised for not coming to POG to discuss this issue sooner, noted the concerns raised and confirmed that in setting up the trials the Department would look at how payments were administered and whether there are any software implications.

3. Debt Management Update

Michelle Charles confirmed that the draft Business Partnership Agreement had been sent out with a deadline for comments of 2nd March. A review meeting had also been set up in Porth (Wales) for 18th March 2009, and POG members were invited to join the meeting.

Any outcomes or comments from the review meeting would be discussed with POG members.

4. Employment Support Allowance (ESA)

Jackie Daly provided the following update:

13 Week Assessment

Jobcentre Plus had not completed the 13 week assessment on time in all cases. There was a backlog in resolving this and the issue had been raised at the Steering Group.

Lesley Pigott confirmed that the issue was raised at the Steering Group but had been parked and she had not heard anything from LAs directly on this matter. However, concerns were raised on the subsidy implication and it was felt that a bulletin needed to be sent out to advise LAs that this you be treated as a departmental error.

Jackie Daly noted the comments made and stated it was important to carrying paying HB/CTB regardless of the 13 week assessment not being carried out.

General Update

Release 1.1 was due on April 6th and the Department would be updating guidance to reflect this as well as running a series of seminars nationally. These seminars would be starting in May and will be running until July. Invitations would be sent out once dates and venues were confirmed.

For those who may not be able to attend the seminars the Department was considering whether to record a DVD. LA representatives welcomed the update and said they would prefer to attend a seminar rather than watch a DVD.

Finally, the link in the recent General Bulletin referring to “Better Off” under ESA was out of date. However, the correct link will be advertised the latest HB Direct and is:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/working-with-dwp/docs/esa-questions-answered-feb09.pdf>

5. Tell us Once Update

Ben Aylott provided the following update on “Tell us Once”

- Tell us Once was a major programme being led by DWP on behalf of Government as a whole to transform the way in which people can tell Central and local Government about changes to their circumstances.

- The proposition is that people should only need to “Tell us Once” in reference to birth, death and change of address once.
- From January 2008 pilots have been running in Rotherham, Tameside, Wolverhampton and LB Southwark.
- From November 2008 pilots have been expanded to include Kent , Lancashire and LB Lambeth
- The pilot is testing the following channel access:

Face to Face - by the LA
 Telephone - by HRMC

Notification

LA Services - HB/CTB Benefit
 DWP Services - Jobcentre Plus Benefits

Notification & Claims

HRMC Services - Tax Credit & Child Benefit

Review of Parenthood Services

- Based on findings the aim was to complete the business case by May 2009 as well as obtain buy-in from senior stakeholders between June and August 2009. The Department was proposing to continue the pathfinders from April 2009 and would be considering other LAs.

LA representatives welcomed the update on “Tell us Once”, but felt that some LAs may already be doing something similar in conjunction with other stakeholders and would not want this scheme to impinge on LA corporate arrangements.

6. Rent Service Update

Gary Trent provided the following update on the Rent Service (England)

- Rent Service performance was good and the churn rate was around 40% at the end of year.
- Information received on Lettings had increased and continues to show upward trend

- In reference to data share the Rent Service has inputted LHA data for the first three months into the system (6,500 records) and this had had little impact
- There was an issue in relation to shared room data, this data has not be processed as current legislation did not allow the Rent Service to ask for eligible service charges. Further update would be provided at next POG meeting.
- An EIS related issue had been raised by several LAs concerning an unexpected request from their software supplier for funding to maintain existing EIS arrangements. The Rent Service believed it could affect round eleven LAs. Further updates on this issue would be presented at future POG meetings.
- The revised review of BRMAs was underway and there was a good chance that some would be completed before the business year end.
- From 1st April 2009 the Rent Service would have a change of name and we would be holding regional events for LAs by the end of March to explain the change.

7. Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE)

John Southworth conducted an electronic presentation on the current issues affecting SHBE (Presentation circulated with POG Minutes)

Data Issues

- Department was aware of problems that were affecting data from LAs and that some LAs are still reluctant or not able to send data.
- We were also aware of on-going problems related to the source of data for some LAs (problems listed in electronic presentation)

HBMS Switch-Off

- Department was at present testing SHBE for HBMS fraud and error referrals and have recently identified a major problem resulting in the non –extraction of non-customer records with a recent Northgate fix. Northgate was currently working on the re-fix.
- Issues with loading and our service supplier have resulted in a delay in the interim HBMS switch-off event which was planned for January.

- The Department was working hard to resolve these issues, but LAs can be assured we would not switch-off any HBMS extracts until our new process has successfully completed testing. Plans for final HBMS switch-off remain in place for April 2009.

HBRF Update

- In response to the “dip” in HBRF forms received in the second quarter of this year a new electronic form was issued together with more detailed instructions.
- In addition a new late returns policy was introduced with an official process for extension to the timetable.
- In the third quarter there were;

Five requests for extensions
3 requests allowed
2 requests rejected.

Data Transfers

- John Southworth confirmed detailed discussions were now well underway to replace the use of PGP with the new Generic File Transfer Service (GFTS) for the transfer of SHBE files from LAs to the DWP and for HBMS products to LAs.
- This new Service should greatly simplify the transfer of files for all parties and we were looking forward to its introduction early in 2009/10
- For the period from April to the end of September 2009, PGP would remain an alternative approved method of transfer but LAs will be expected to move to GFTS at the earliest opportunity.

LA representatives acknowledged the update on current issues affecting SHBE and felt it would be helpful if LAs could have a list of SHBE issues. Concerns were also raised about requesting data from LAs within a week as mistakes could be made due to the limited time allocated and that Audit Commission should be made aware of this.

John Southworth confirmed that it would be possible to obtain a log on particular SHBE issues and which could be shared with specific LAs. In reference to making Audit Commission aware of limited time to submit returns, LAs should refer the Audit Commission to John Southworth on this matter.

8. Pension Service Update

Jim Boyd provided the following update from the Pension Service:

State Retirement Pension

- The State Retirement Pension clearance was 2 1/2 days at the end of January.
- Work outstanding was 3 ½ weeks (52,000 claims) but these include advance claims
- Change of Circumstance clearance time averaged 6 days.

Pension Credit

- Average clearance time at end of January was 16 ½ days (target is 15 days).
- Change of circumstance clearance time average was 3 days
- Amount of work outstanding as from 2nd February was 4.7 weeks (44,200 new claims)

9. Jobcentre Plus Update

Chris Bullen provided the following update from Jobcentre Plus:

- There had been a significant increase in the number of claims received over the last few weeks. Claims for Jobseekers Allowance 80,000 is double of what Jobcentre Plus had to deal with this time last year.
- Jobcentre Plus was managing to see 75% of customers within 3 days of contact.
- They were still meeting clearance targets and maintaining our performance. Expectation that they would be able to live within targets in the coming year.
- If LAs had any performance issues they should take them up with your local contacts.

LA representatives asked whether there were any projections on how much unemployment would go up. Chris Bullen was not aware of any information.

Alison McGrory (LA representative) said that she had tried unsuccessfully to establish liaison arrangements with her local Jobcentre Plus contact, yet Jobcentre Plus had sent a letter to her Chief Executive stating the opposite.

Chris Bullen asked Alison to forward the details to him and he would look into the matter.

10. AOB

Social Security (Habitual Residence) Amendment Regulations 2009

- Barbara Horton provided the following information on regulations completed earlier this week in relation to the programme of bringing back elderly British Citizens from Zimbabwe.
- First arrivals were expected in middle of March 2009 and about 750 people were expected altogether with majority being over 70 years.
- The regulations which had been laid earlier in the week, waived the Habitual Residency Test (HRT) for people on this programme. This applied to HB/CTB.
- Parallel regulations would cover CLG issues relating to access to housing within LAs and RSLs.
- Guidance would be issued, however, due to the special circumstance/ emergency the amended regulations did not go to SSAC for consultation.

LA representatives asked whether guidance would include capital assessment and which parts, the people be settling in?

Barbara confirmed that the people would probably not have any capital assets and the people would be asked to express preference on where they wished to settle although the preference is subject to housing availability. They would have documentation on them regarding the settlement programme and the Pension Service was aware of the situation.

Finally, LA representatives suggested it would be helpful if Social Services were made aware of the resettlement programme.

The next POG meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 25th March 2009.