

Practitioners Operational Group Meeting  
29<sup>th</sup> April 2009  
CIPFA Robert Street

Minutes

Attendees:

Danielle Wells	DWP HBSD (Chairperson)
Sabby Mahal-Riordan	DWP HBSD (Secretariat)
Colin Heward	DWP HBSD
Ron Butler	DWP HBSD
Cheryl Weaver	DWP LAPD
James Boyd	DWP PDCS
Paul Cusworth	DWP Information Delivery
Chris Bullen	Jobcentre Plus Partnership
Michelle Charles	Debt Management
Chris Jones	Debt Management
Gary Trent	VOA (England)
Mandi Barlcay	VOA (England)
Karl Thomas	VOA (Wales)
Heather Neate	Audit Commission
Alison McGrory	Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
David Collier	Birmingham City Council
Judith Johnson	Cherwell District Council/LGA
Lesley Pigott	LB Camden/LGA/Steering Group Representatives
Lyn Sutherland	LB Barnet/LGA
Pamela Richardson	Gateshead Council
Gwyn Thomas	Westminster City Council/London Councils
Paul Ellary	LB Kensington & Chelsea
Alan Sinclair	City of Edinburgh Council/COSLA
Frankie Cartwright	South Staffordshire Council

**Apologies:**

Jane McManus (Leeds), Julie Holden (Tandridge) and Fay Moore (Tribunals),  
Margo Hodgens (Glasgow) and Mark Underwood (LB Bexley)

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

Minutes

These were agreed without change.

## Action Points

Action Point 03/05/09: Persons From Abroad (PFA) –to issue guidance on the latest amendments as soon as possible.

LA representatives acknowledged the notes sent out by Ursula Brennan, although they suggested that the first page should have cross-references to which bit of the European Directive they are referring too.

They also requested that the notes which provide the latest guidance on PFA are circulated to all LAs via a General Bulletin.

### **Action Point 01/04/09: Ursula Brennan to circulate the latest guidance on PFA to all LAs via a General Bulletin.**

Action Point 04/09/08: To discuss with appropriate DWP Officer whether the Verification of Assets (VOA) form within the HB/CTB Guidance Manual can be changed to a PDF format in order to improve quality.

LA representatives pointed out that an image document already existed and requested further clarification on why there was a delay.

Sabby Riordan noted the comments and confirmed that she would liaise with the DWP Officer to establish when the PDF format can be introduced.

## **2. VOA Update**

### Rent Officers (Wales) Update

Karl Thomas provided the following update based the papers circulated prior to the meeting:

- The number of HB subsidy cases being referred to Rent Officers (Wales) continue to be at a reduced level in comparison to the same periods last year
- They had started the Broad Rental Market Areas (LHA) and BRMA (LRR) review process and had had an initial round of meetings with all LA areas in Wales.
- It was anticipated that the review would be completed by the end of December 2009 with full implementation to be decided when the LAs advised them of the lead in times as a result of IT commitments etc.
- On 8<sup>th</sup> April 2009 Rent Officers (Wales) contacted all LAs advising them of:
  - Details of consultation process for each LA
  - Final timeline for the review process

- Details of the Rent Officers (Wales) internal processes for deciding BRMAs

### Potentially Violent Cases (PVC)

Karl Thomas also raised the importance of sharing information on Potentially Violent Cases (PVC) between various stakeholders and requested clarification on what the current position was on sharing this information.

LA representatives acknowledged concerns raised but felt that it would be down to individual LAs to set up their own arrangements as underlined by data sharing protocols. It would be difficult to establish a national protocol and a decision would have to be made on a case by case basis

Danielle Wells noted the issue and agreed to look into what the departmental line was on sharing information on PVC between various stakeholders. However, she did not feel this was an issue that POG could take forward with a view to establishing nationally agreed arrangement that all LAs would adhere to.

**Action Point 02/04/09: Danielle Wells to clarify the departmental line on sharing information about PVC.**

### VOA Update (England)

Gary Trent provided the following update:

- The Transfer of the Rent Service to VOA had been completed with the same staff and IT systems.
- BRMAS – first 14 reviews would be implemented on 1<sup>st</sup> June and the next 20 reviews had been started.
- Details of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) would be forwarded to LAs shortly.

LA representatives noted the update but felt that as some of the changes meant significant changes in the benefit levels some form of transitional protection was needed to cushion the effects. They also wished to know what the impact was likely to be on customers. They would be raising the issue at the DWP/LAA steering group

## **3. Information Delivery Communications and SHBE Update**

### Information Delivery Communications

Paul Cusworth provided the following update:

- There has been a re-organisation in Information Delivery/HBMS and it has been decided to set up an HBMS communication team which he had been brought in to manage.
- The role of the team would be to liaise with all relevant stakeholders including HBSD, WAG and LAs.
- If particular LAs were having problems with information, results, etc that they were receiving they would be the first point of contact with them
- The team would also be taking the lead on communications for the whole of Information Delivery which included GMS.

### SHBE Update

- 402 LAs had returned at least one extract (still 5 to go) and 380 LAs have returned 3 or more extracts. The remaining 5 still have a variety of problems including the 4 Anite Orbis LAs that should be ready in May.
- Testing the use of SHBE data in fraud and error matching was now complete. The SHBE sub-extract and non-customer data was now loading at BT without error and now being run for data-matching
- 188 LAs had now been advised that their HBMS extract is no longer required, by the end of May the figure should be in the region of 230
- The further 170 were Northgate and Anite, Orbis LAs where a fix to the errors that had been encountered would not be sorted out until June.
- Final switch off had been re-planned for the end of July 2009. This has been communicated to the DWP/LAA Steering Group.

### Pension Credit/Guaranteed Credit Underpayment Rule

- It had been decided to postpone the Pension Credit underpayment rule CT/005 and instead carry out a national scan for this area of work. This will replace another national scan which was already factored in.
- The reason for this is that there will be in the region of 38,000 cases picked up within the rule and we thought that by running a scan and rule at the same time would be unmanageable for the LAs.
- The next time the actual rule is run, as long as the national scan cases are actioned, will mean there are far less cases issued to LAs and they would be easier to handle. We will notify LAs about this change as soon as possible.

LA representatives welcomed the updates, but felt that it was important to ensure that HBMS switch off should only take place when everything was in working order. Clarification was also requested on what SHBE figures would be published.

#### **4. ESA Update**

Colin Heward Provided the following Update:

##### Operational Update

- We had not received many e-mails from LAs regarding operational issues, now that ESA operational guidance is available electronically.
- ESA Customer Account Management (CAM) Release 1.1 went live on 6<sup>th</sup> April. This enabled ESA (c) ETDs to be received by LAs.
- ESA CAM was being rolled out to processing centres from May (until September). Details were in the April General Information Bulletin (GIB).
- ESA Cam Release 1.2 scheduled for 26<sup>th</sup> October, this marks the start of full HB/CTB gather and a great deal of work was going into development and testing at present.

##### ESA Seminars

- First Seminar was held on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2009 in Newcastle and the event was attended by 29 people. We took away a number of questions and are looking at starting a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document.
- 13 more Seminars to go.

##### Benefit Advisor Service (BAS)

- BAS had recently been advertised in the media and could be accessed through Directgov.
- Current version allows the public to go into the system and put in their personal circumstances in order to indicate what they may be entitled too if they claimed benefit.
- Release 1.3 in September will take this a step further as individuals will be able to put in income details and BAS should be able to calculate HB/CTB entitlement.

- The system is being tested and if the customer puts in the correct details it does the correct calculations. The system will also allow scenario's whereby the customer may be earning income but wishes to establish how this may impact on benefit entitlement.
- Tax Credits also form part of the BAS system. It will calculate them independently or in a scenario with other benefits.

## **5. Pension Service Update**

Jim Boyd provided the following update:

### Performance

- On 30/03/09 there were 44,790 outstanding Pension Credit cases. The best Pension Centre clearing rate was 3.1 to 6.5 days
- On 30/03/09 there were 136,000 outstanding Pension Credit change of circumstances cases. The best clearance rate was between 3.4 to 10.4 days

### Budget

- The Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI) higher rate of 6.08% will continue until December 2009.
- Changes in capital from £6,000 to £10,000, does not start until November 2009.
- The impact of the capital change will be more customers may be entitled to Pension Credit from savings credit and Guaranteed Credit.

### Structural Changes

- Stockport Pension Centre is moving to Jobcentre Plus in July 2009.
- Liaison Managers have been asked to work with LAs whilst the movement of work is taking place

## **6. Jobcentre Plus Update**

### Recruitment

- Jobcentre Plus is recruiting about 2,000 staff a month from PDCS, CSA Dept Management and externally.

## Performance

- In March 2009 350,000 JSA claims processed an increase by 10,000 on February 2009. Also more or less doubled the same time last year
- JSA claims processing time is 9.8 days within the 11 day target.
- Jobcentre Plus is moving work around centres to help with the strain of work
- February 2009 figures show that 43,000 Income Support claims were processed
- Incapacity Benefit claims continues to fall to 4,700 in March 2009.

LA representatives welcomed the update but requested clarification on an issue regarding JSA and overpayment, as it appeared that Jobcentre Plus Offices were not issuing formal decision notices due to a legal issue. This means that it would be harder for LAs to establish if the overpayment was due to DWP error.

Chris Bullen noted the above query and suggested that LAs need to take this matter up with their Liaison Managers.

Michelle Charles confirmed that Debt Management would classify if an overpayment was an official error. Therefore, LAs could ring Debt Management to establish official error.

Michelle also confirmed that she was not aware of any legal challenge and this could be down to a specific case.

## **7. Debt Management Update**

Michelle Charles provided the following update:

- The Debt Management Review meeting took place on 18<sup>th</sup> March in Porth
- Issues were raised about how Debt Management manage LA work and a number of recommendations were suggested which have been forwarded to Debt Management Executive Team.
- They were waiting on the Debt Management Executive Team to make decision and would then notify POG.
- Hoping to start electronically transferring data between Debt Management and LAs.

## 8. AOB

### Budget Announcement

Danielle Wells provided the following update on the budget announcement made on 22<sup>nd</sup> April based on the letter Paul Howarth circulated to various stakeholders shortly after the announcement:

- The £15 per week excess that LHA customers receive over and above their contractual rent will be removed from April 2010 for all new claims or customers who move address. This change will apply to existing customers from the review date of their claim
- As already mentioned earlier in the meeting, the lower capital limit for Pension Credit will be increased from £6,000 to £10,000 from 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2009
- A new permitted work earning disregard of up to £92.00 a week will be introduced from April 2010 at the earliest. It will apply to HB/CTB customers who are claiming contributory ESA, Incapacity Benefit, or Severe Disablement Allowance.
- From April 2010, the Department would introduce changes to the way overpayments of HB are calculated when a customer changes address within the LA area.
- In addition to the 1.3 billion announced in PBR, the Government was setting aside a further £1.7 billion for DWP over 2009/10 and 2010/11 to deliver effective support for the unemployed.

### Overpayment Subsidy

LA representatives confirmed that Circular A11/2009 was issued yesterday, whereby examples that were used to clarify the type of overpayment stated that if an LA failed to act on third party information then it should be treated as a claimant error.

This appeared to be a change as historically the above type of example had always been treated as LA error. Yet they had not seen any background explanation as to why this has been changed.

**Action Point: 03/04/09: Jane Autherson to provide further clarification on the overpayment changes regarding third party information introduced in Circular A11/2009**

### Temporary Accommodation

LA representatives requested an update for 2010/11.

Danielle Wells confirmed that the Department were waiting on Ministers to agree proposals. The Department would notify POG members of further developments as soon as possible.

**Next POG meeting to be held on Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009**