

Practitioners Operational Group (POG) Meeting
Wednesday 18th June 2008
CIPFA Building, Robert Street London WC2N

Minutes

Attendance:

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| Danielle Wells | DWP HBSD (Chairperson) |
| Sabby Mahal-Riordan | DWP HBSD (Secretariat) |
| Joseph Stacey | DWP HBSD |
| Malcolm Mattack | DWP HBSD |
| David Wright | DWP HBSD |
| Colin Heward | DWP HBSD |
| Jackie Daly | DWP HBSD |
| Cheryl Weaver | DWP PDT |
| Jan Ripley | DWP |
| Fiona Mcleish | The Pension Service |
| Chris Bullen | Jobcentre Plus Partnerships |
| Heather Neate | Audit Commission |
| Gary Trent | The Rent Service |
| Karl Thomas | The Rent Officer Service (Wales) |
| Lesley Pigott | LB Camden/LGA/ Steering Group Representative |
| Lyn Sutherland | LB Barnet/LGA |
| Gwyn Thomas | Westminster City Council/ London Councils |
| Ian McCardle | Bradford MDC |
| Paul Ellary | LB Kensington & Chelsea/London Councils |
| David Collier | Birmingham City Council |
| Judith Johnson | Cherwell District Council/LGA |
| Marion Smith | West Dunbartonshire Council/COSLA |
| Alan Sinclair | City of Edinburgh Council/ COSLA |
| Jane McManus | Leeds City Council |
| Margo Hopkins | Glasgow City/COSLA |
| Frankie Cartwright | South Staffordshire Council |

Apologies:

Norman Foster (The Rent Service), Julie Holden (Tandridge), Mark Underwood (LB Bexley), Michelle Charles, Alison McGrory (Solihull)

1. Welcome and Introductions

Danielle Wells welcomed all attendees and introductions were made.

2. Minutes/Action Points/ Matters Arising

Minutes

LA representatives raised the following corrections on the attendee's list from the last POG minutes:

- Lesley Pigott represents the LGA and not London Councils
- Lyn Sutherland represents the LGA and not London Councils

The above corrections were noted by the POG Secretariat.

Action Points

Action Point 1/01/08: DWP to establish why LAs cannot access the MIS guidance, and if this is due to a technical problem are there alternative ways for LAs to access the guidance.

This action point was last updated in the POG action point log in February 2008. Jan Ripley confirmed that a lot of information on how to access the MIS guidance is available on the DWP website area and LAs should not encounter the problems they had had earlier in the year.

Action Point 2/01/08: DWP to consider amending the definition of RSL to include the situation when an ALMO may purchase a property.

Joe Stacey confirmed that DWP solicitors agreed with the LA analysis in reference to the ALMO in Westminster. The ALMO was not strictly an ALMO as it appeared to be acting as a head landlord. Therefore in terms of legislation a case which is treated as a rent allowance should be referred to the Rent Service.

LA representatives acknowledged the update and it was agreed to maintain this action point so that Joe could provide a further update in due course.

Action Point 01/05/08: Government Connect – Lee Grafton to clarify whether LA staff that deal with restricted data will be required to undergo a police check.

LA representatives confirmed that they had received some information from Lee Grafton but they could not understand the information. It was agreed that the action point should be re-phrased to say "Confirmation required on

whether benefit staff accessing IT systems to process benefits require security clearance”.

A response from Lee Grafton should be circulated to POG members rather than individual LAs.

Action Point 02/05/08: To circulate a note of issues raised by SSAC in relation to proposed backdating changes to HB/CTB.

Danielle Wells confirmed that no formal response from SSAC had been received yet. Once SSAC had written its response it would be submitted to Ministers who would need to decide whether to take account of their recommendations and re-consider the proposal or to continue with their original plans.

Action Point 04/05/08: DWP to provide further clarity on linking rules in reference to LHA

Danielle Wells confirmed that the recent article in HB Direct and the General Bulletin issued to LAs provides the answer to the above action point.

LA representatives welcomed the recent bulletins to clarify the action point, although they would have preferred for the guidance to go out as an “A” circular rather than a General Bulletin.

3. The Rent Service Update

England

Gary Trent provided an update based on the paper circulated prior to the meeting, which covered the Rent Service (England) performance against key performance key indicators and the HB churn rate to date.

- Caseload comparison, including monthly and Year to Date (YTD) Churn stood at 8.2% by the end of May.
- The daily average HB caseload since April 2008 is showing a progressive downward trend
- LHA-Direct is a website used to exchange data with LAs and publish national LHA and BRMA data to the Public. The Rent Service runs the website as a managed service on behalf of the Scottish Rent Registration Service and the Rent Officers Wales.
- You can obtain an electronic list of regulations to assist you on LHA - Direct and there are also plans to publish the schedule of and criteria for BRMA reviews on the website.

- 142 LAs across England and Wales have not yet sent any data to the Rent Service, this may be due to technical problems

Wales

Karl Thomas provided the following update:

- There is a significant reduction in the number of referrals for May 2008.
- The LHA rates continue to be prepared and submitted to LHA-Direct. Although we are slightly behind in comparison to England.
- The review process for all BRMA's would take between 12-15 months.
- Data sharing was still a problem as 3 LAs had not provided data in last 3 months, although this could be due to technical problems.

Danielle Wells welcomed the update from both Gary Trent and Karl Thomas and suggested that the Rent Services would need to continue to explain to authorities their need for the information as there was no statutory requirement on LAs to provide it. They would also need to keep DWP informed of progress on the issue.

4. ESA Update

Communication

Colin Heward provided the following update:

- Outputs happening in Release 1 have been agreed.
- Full-end electronic testing is continuing and it is picking up issues with the output.
- Jobcentre Plus product managerial walk through is taking place
- In reference to implementation with ESA plans are in process to develop an assurance package it is hoped that this will be circulated to POG LA representatives before October.

Colin reminded LA representatives that a lengthy Q&A paper had been sent to some LAs and comments were to be received by 23/6/08.

Colin also requested clarity on how the LA representatives wished to deal with ESA Q&A communication documents as this area sits under operational issues.

LA representatives confirmed that they would like to see early versions rather than just the finished product. Since the meeting Colin has forwarded an ESA communication approach document to LA representatives to comment on by 7th July 2008.

LA representatives welcomed the above update however they requested further clarity on whether there will be an ETD on ESA IR decisions and that it was important for claimants to be aware of what they were claiming under ESA.

Colin confirmed that there will be an ETD on ESA IR decisions on the day. In other situation a manual form will be circulated giving appropriate details. In reference to the latter point the strategy is to have a consistent approach in what Jobcentre Plus telling the Public and the LAs.

Finance

Danielle Wells noted that POG had raised the issue of funding for the extra costs to authorities of the phased implementation of ESA. Internal discussions were taking place about the extent of the extra burden this would place on authorities and how/when it might be financed.

Action Point 01/06/08: DWP to provide an update on ESA finance

5. Data Transfer Update

Jan Ripley conducted an electronic presentation on HB data collection and the Single HB Extract (Please see electronic presentation)

Main points:

- The Single HB extract is completely different from the old clerical returns collected up to the end of March.
- The performance information will be derived from the scan from different fields of data. Rules on this have been written and issued to software suppliers. It is recognised that some software suppliers may be slower than others in providing this information to their users.
- All clerical returns will be switched off. This will include stats 121, 122 and 124. You will be left with a 100% scan which will be a monthly return.
- Other clerical returns like the Fraud Information Investigation and Recoveries have not been so easy to collect on the scan and will run along separately.
- Still running the HBMS scan to check quality of the scan. We are intending to run it temporally but it may be longer than the suggested month of October.

- All LA software will have encrypted data and there have been no problems in collecting HBMS data which is encrypted to EDS.
- However, there is a problem with the size of the mail box at DWP Newcastle and some large attachments are unable to come through, we are looking to get the size of the mail box increased.
- So we have suspended collection of HB Single Extract Data due until all processes are sorted out. Information has gone to Benefit Managers to attach data to circular A9 and hold onto it until ready for collection date is agreed
- We recognise the concerns raised about the delay in data collection and that as soon as we start collecting data there may be problems with software so early data may not be as robust as later data
- We will issue a circular to LAs on how we will approach these concerns and try to provide information on what is wrong with the early data. Although we will require 3 months to review data. We will notify LAs if there are any anomalies.
- Performance will still be published quarterly for this year, but we are looking to publish performance on a monthly basis in 2009/10

LA representatives welcomed the update on the Single HB Extract but expressed concern about the delay as the subsidy re-distribution was supposed to be based on the Single HB Extract.

LA representatives also highlighted problems with EDS accessing data as they do not appear have received LA e-mails and some cases LAs have had to send the data 5 times, so it can be very time consuming. Some LAs are also having problems with their HBMS data returns as well.

Action Point 02/06/08: Jan Ripley to establish the reason why EDS are encountering problems in receiving data returns from LAs

LA representatives requested further clarity on whether LAs still need to do WIB returns.

Jan Ripley confirmed that as far she was aware LAs did not have to do WIB returns but she will check and issue a bulletin so everyone is clear on what should be done.

LA representatives also requested clarity on whether LAs are still required to provide information on BPVIs on the clerical fraud returns.

Jan confirmed that BPVI information is useful for answering Parliamentary Questions.

However, LA representatives stated that unless it was an absolute requirement to provide this data, they will not do so, otherwise LAs do not have funding to do this, and we may want to raise this at the Steering Group.

6. CIS – Memorandum of Understanding

Malcolm Mattack conducted an electronic presentation introducing the need for the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and explained the reason for the change and what the next steps were. (Please see presentation slides)

The MoU and the LA CIS was issued after the POG meeting for comments and an update will be provided at the next POG meeting scheduled for 30th July.

7. AOB

Government Connect

Ian McCardle had read an article in a local government journal about the DWP Government Connect project and a move towards a more joined up service delivery, such as free school meal assessment and requested more clarity.

Danielle Wells had not seen the article but believed that there were plans to provide information on free school meals via the Department for Children, Schools and Families via which there was a legal gateway for relevant staff in authorities to receive this information.

HB Review

Gwyn Thomas requested clarity on whether the HB Review was limited to working age only and whether LAs would be invited to take part in the Review.

Danielle Wells confirmed that the HB Review concerned people of working age because its primary focus was on improving work incentives. However, if the review led to a conclusion that pointed to significantly different treatment of people of working age then there would inevitably be implications for customers of pensionable age. LAs would not be formally invited to take part because the review was a joint internal review between DWP and Treasury but the Local Authority Associations were being engaged. There was, however, an email address to which anyone or any organisation who felt they had evidence that they wanted to contribute to the review could send material. The e:mail address is Hb.evidencereview@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Recovery Data Format

Lyn Sutherland raised this issue as there appeared to be no funding available for recovery of data in XML format in April 2009. Even if LAs did get funding they would not be ready by April 2009.

Lyn also expressed concern about the changes being introduced by the Pension Service with reference to sending the rent form to the customer and claim form to the LA and was told guidance would be issued to clarify the process.

Fiona Mcleish confirmed that no decision had been taken on funding and would provide an update on the guidance covering the above changes.

Action Point 03/06/08: DWP to up date on the decision on funding any software changes for the new Electronic Transfer of data process from next April.

Action Point 04/06/08: Fiona Mcleish to provide an update on guidance from the Pension Service on any changes being introduced with specific reference to an issue around Registered Social Landlords and if LAs had arrangements with them did they have to wait for a rent form if they had not received it before they received the LACI and ETD.

Changes to Tribunal Services

Danielle Wells explained that the Appeals Service was circulating regulations to special tribunal user groups in Manchester that DWP had been informed (via the steering group) had an impact on HB/CTB administration. She asked whether LAs had seen anything or were aware of what these changes may be.

LA representatives confirmed that their understanding was that they were structural changes not process changes but thought that they would need to be publicised to authorities.

Action Point: 05/06/08: DWP to establish the changes to the Tribunal Service to not require active intervention and ensure that the changes are publicised to LAs

Debt Management

Danielle Wells confirmed that she had received feedback from LAs in Wales that they were encountering difficulties in contacting their Debt Management counterparts, as Debt Management had allegedly told them they should not be liaising with outside bodies. She asked whether other authorities had encountered similar problems.

LA representatives confirmed that they had had difficulties in getting Debt Management to engage with them or attend meetings.

Danielle also confirmed that there was a partnership agreement with Debt Management which needed to be reviewed as it could be out of date.

Action Point 06/06/08: Invite Debt Management colleagues to attend the next meeting to discuss how relations with local authority colleagues might be re-established and to review the partnership agreement

The next POG meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 30th July 2008.