

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

Urgent Bulletin

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HB/CTB U7/2006

21 March 2006

Contact	Tara.Taggart@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Who should read	All Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit staff
Action	For information
Subject	Service Level Agreements

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Service Level Agreements

- 1 The process of reviewing and updating the Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for 2006/07 is now nearing completion. This Bulletin provides the hyperlinked web addresses to the SLAs currently available.
- 2 The SLAs available have been attached as links to this bulletin as a contingency
The Rent Service SLA 2006/07
Appendix A: The Rent Service SLA 2006/07
The link below also provides access to The Rent Service Website and will link you directly to the current SLA
<http://www.therentservice.gov.uk/documents/housing-benefit/sla-between-rent-service-and-housing-benefit-department.doc>
Appendix B: The Debt Management Partnership Agreement 2006/07
http://intranet/1/corp/sites/finance/fsd/debtman/news/dwp_m238560.pdf
- 3 These documents have been subject to consultation with the Local Authority Associations (LAAs).
- 4 Work is continuing to finalise the SLAs for The Pension Service, Jobcentre Plus, and the Appeals Service. They will be distributed as they become available.

Next Steps

- 5 Each of the Businesses will shortly be distributing the National Framework Agreement and their revised SLAs to staff. The SLAs attached to this bulletin set out the baseline expectations and obligations for both sides and LAs should feel free to build on these SLAs with their partners to make sure local needs are reflected.

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SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT 2006/2007

BETWEEN

THE RENT SERVICE (OFFICE LOCATION)

AND

**.....HOUSING BENEFIT
DEPARTMENT**

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Housing Benefit

Model National Service Level Agreement between Local Authority Housing Benefit departments and The Rent Service 2006-07

PURPOSE

This model national Service Level Agreement (SLA) has been drawn up in accordance with the DWP National framework agreement. It has the approval of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Its purpose is to provide a framework for good working arrangements between local housing benefit (HB) departments and rent service offices.

The primary aim of the SLA is to ensure Housing Benefit claimants are receiving efficient and cost effective services with as little delay as possible. The SLA is also designed to improve communications and contact between both sides through liaison meetings, open days, training and exchange programmes.

The agreements will be displayed prominently in both offices, so all staff are aware of the service they are expected to provide and what is expected of them.

To supplement this agreement The Rent Service publishes a Good Practice Guide which contains a detailed explanation of how rent officers make determinations within the statutory framework of their Order. This guide also provides details as to how the relationship between local authorities and local valuation teams should work.

THE RENT SERVICE WILL

HB Determinations (without inspection):

- Determine 87% of Housing Benefit cases (without inspection) within 3 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of Housing Benefit cases (without inspection) within 5 working days of receipt

HB Determinations (with inspection):

- Determine 87% of Housing Benefit cases (with inspection) within 15 working days of receipt
- Determine 95 % of Housing Benefit cases (with inspection) within 25 working days of receipt

Pre Tenancy Determinations:

- Determine 87% of PTD cases within 4 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of PTD cases within 5 working days of receipt

Redeterminations:

- Determine 87% of Redetermination cases within 15 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of Redetermination cases within 20 working days of receipt

Identifying reference number:

Determinations by TRS will show the local authority's reference number but will not identify the claimant by name.

Potentially violent people

In line with DWP guidance, TRS will give the authority details of Housing Benefit claimants or other relevant members of the public whom it considers to be "potentially violent" or to be a risk to its staff.



Updating:

These targets will be updated from 1 April 2006 in line with the Agency's Secretary of State targets

Liaison Contact:

_____ will be available on tel: _____ between the hours of _____ and _____ Monday to Friday, to deal with specific queries. *

Liaison Meetings:

Hold, a minimum of, quarterly meetings to review the performance of the agreement, to involve appropriate staff at all levels

Monitor Performance:

At quarterly meetings, monitor the performance of TRS and the HB office, and discuss the quality of service each provides.

Errors in rent officer determinations:

Provide automatic substitute determinations in cases where a rent officer determination contains an error which relates to inaccurate property-related information being provided on the referral.*

Complaints:

Within 5 working days reply to any complaints from claimants or others about TRS which have been passed on by the HB office.

Create Awareness:

Through staff exchange programmes and open days create opportunities for staff to meet and get a greater understanding of each other's roles.

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HOUSING BENEFIT DEPARTMENTS WILL

The following percentages and figures are produced as a guide. TRS does not monitor the figures and therefore cannot produce performance statistics for these suggested figures. They are published as a guide and as a recommendation that both the local authority and the local TRS office can adhere to. The figures provide a base to show that both LA and TRS are providing a best value service to their customers and that the HB claim process is working as efficiently as possible.

HB Referrals:

- Refer ___% of cases within 3 working days of receipt
- Refer ___% of cases within 5 working days of receipt

Pre-Tenancy Determinations:

- Refer ___% of pre-tenancy determinations within 1 working day of receipt

Redeterminations:

- Refer ___% of redeterminations within ___ working days of receiving the request
- Refer ___% of redeterminations within ___ working days of receiving the request

Identifying Reference Number:

Provide a unique, identifying reference number for all referrals (including PTDs).

Potentially violent people

The authority will provide the relevant information to TRS about "potentially violent people" (PVPs) that they identify and whom TRS staff are likely to come into contact with.

Claimant's National Insurance Number:

Endeavour to provide the claimant's National Insurance Number in all cases*.

Claimant's telephone number:

Endeavour to provide the claimant's telephone number in cases where it is known, to enable TRS to resolve minor queries and make appointments to inspect.

Landlord's name and address:

Endeavour to provide the landlord's name and address in all cases.

Errors in rent officer determinations/redeterminations:

Accept automatic provision of substitute determinations in cases where a rent officer determination contains an error which relates to inaccurate property-related information being provided on the referral. *

Complaints:

Within 2 working days pass on any complaints about TRS (apart from redetermination requests) to TRS for a reply.

Liaison Contact:

- _____ will be available on tel: _____, between the hours of _____ and _____ Monday to Friday to answer your questions. *

Liaison Meetings:

- Hold quarterly meetings to review the performance of the agreement and to involve appropriate staff at all levels

Create Awareness:

Through staff exchange programmes create opportunities for staff to meet and get a greater understanding of each other's roles.

Joint Signatories to the agreement:

**Rent Service
 Valuation Team Manager**

Housing Benefit Manager

**Rent Service
 Redetermination Unit Manager**

Date:

*NB: * Subject to local agreement*

Partnership Agreement

between

**Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Financial
Services Division - Debt Management (DM)**

and

Local Authorities (LA)

2006/07

**This Partnership Agreement has been ratified by Jeff Taylor, Head of Debt Management and the
Local Authority Practitioners Operational Group**

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**Copy of The National Framework Agreement
For Service Level Agreements**

Introduction

1. This document introduces the Partnership Agreement between the LA and DWP for the recovery of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit overpayments. It contains the requirements to set up and principles of Service Level Agreements between DWP businesses and their LA counterparts and is endorsed by the Practitioners Operational Group (POG).
2. The appendices relate solely to the specific, model, minimum service standards expected of DM and LA and should be read in context with the National Framework Agreement.

Service and Performance Requirements for Debt Management and the Local Authorities

(Appendix 1)

The following table lists the services and performance requirements against which standards will be measured and reports made. We are looking to review and incorporate additional methods of control to provide future data to inform improvement activities.

No	Requirement	Minimum Standard	By Whom	Method of Control
1	Develop a mechanism for local contact. Provide regularly updated list of contact points in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAs and • DM 	An agreed structure for regular communication, including making use of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nominated Officers (para 14 National Framework and App3) • Regular meetings, video links etc as appropriate. • Exchange visits where agreed and practicable between staff. 	Liaison required between Operational Managers within DM and LA	Through joint meetings.
2	Agree locally the method, level and type of information required to support the referral of HB/CTB overpayments made on the standard referral form.	LAs to ensure all referrals that request DM to recover HB/CTB debt are fully completed with the relevant details on the required national pro-forma. All possible action should be taken to check if debtor is at address stated and in receipt of a prescribed benefit prior to issue. Refer to requirement 4. NB: A new standard form and electronic method for making and receiving referrals is being developed. Any changes to current practices will be notified appropriately.	LA DM Managers/ staff.	Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings.
3	Respond to initial requests for deductions, made on the appropriate referral form (for current version see appendices in circular A29/2001), in respect of HB/CTB overpayments	Notify LA that recovery is not appropriate or not possible giving the reasons for this within 10 working days of original request. Notify LA that recovery will commence from a given date and at a given rate within 20 working days of original request.	DM	Quality assurance checks. Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings

No	Requirement	Minimum Standard	By Whom	Method of Control
4	Where requests are received from the LA or DM for further specific information for a potential referral, which is not available through the Remote Access Terminal System (RATS), (or its replacement when available) arrangements should be made to provide this within 5 working days.	Requests for information are to be cleared within 5 working days of the request. DWP will provide a Standard Enquiry Facility and helpdesk when RATS are replaced. Further information on this replacement can be found at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/rat/	Overpayment staff in the LA and DM	Quality assurance checks. Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings
5	LA to notify DM where a potential sanction (agreed to pay a penalty, admission under caution of fraud/deception or successful prosecution) applies on cases investigated by fraud officers or where a sanction may be applied after further action. Legislation permits a set increase in the rate of allowable deductions, where sanctions have been applied, for fraud overpayments.	To be sent within 5 working days of the initial or subsequent referral to DM, or where recovery has commenced. Further notification is required when the sanction is confirmed or withdrawn. DM to action referral and implement higher rate deductions as appropriate within guidelines	LA/DM	Quality assurance checks. Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings
6	Agree a mechanism and process for the LA to advise when there is a linked HB overpayment to a DWP benefit overpayment.	Where linked cases are identified and notified to Debt Management, Debt Management will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process Sanction cases within 10 days and Non-Sanction cases within 30 days, notifying the LA of the outcome decision or write off, together with supporting documentation, at the same time as the decision is issued to the customer. (Consistent with DM-JCP/CFIS agreement) • In all other cases notify LA of outcome decision (including write offs) with supporting evidence within 5 days of the date of decision. 	DM/LA	Analyse monthly statistical data Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings.

No	Requirement	Minimum Standard	By Whom	Method of Control
7	Notify LA when recovery complete or deductions ceased for other reasons.	DM to ensure that the LA is informed within 5 working days of identification when full recovery has been achieved or recovery has broken down. In the latter case, details of the amounts recovered, balance still outstanding and reason for ceasing recovery to be reported.	DM	Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings.
8	Make repayments to the LAs of money recovered on their behalf	DM to ensure any debt recovered on behalf of LAs is reimbursed within 8 weeks of the end of the respective quarter. Payments should be accompanied with a schedule itemising amounts appropriate to individual debtors. (Applies to the minority of cases not currently paid via the Third Party Payments system. Third Party Payments cases will continue to be paid 4 weekly into LA account and notified by schedule)	DM	Appropriate management control. Review of performance against standards as part of joint meetings.
9	<p>Customer Complaints and MPs enquiries.</p> <p>We are looking to incorporate a requirement for customer complaints. The detail behind the requirement is on hold pending the outcome of a national Customer Services meeting. In the interim any issues surrounding Customer Complaints and MP's enquiries should continue to be dealt with on local basis.</p>		DM LA	

Monitoring Guidance for the Debt Management and Local Authorities Partnership Agreement

(Appendix 2)

In setting up the PA the aim should be to adhere, where at all possible, to the service provisions specified in the PA as set down in the regulations. Where there is any deviation from that standard, discussion should take place at a local level to put in place a target and timescale acceptable both to DM and LA. Details of any such agreement should be included within the end of year statement of performance.

The guidance should therefore be used to inform local discussions between DM and LA with a view to putting in place monitoring arrangements which are acceptable to both sides and which satisfy current legislation.

Service Provisions within the PA are the minimum requirements needed to support PA 2006/7. Any local deviation from the minimum standards can only be in excess of those given and must be documented and agreed by both DM and the LA.

Nominated Officers Supporting the Debt Management and Local Authority Partnership Agreement (Appendix 3)

- Each party to the PA will provide an appropriate nominated contact point within his or her organisation. The role of the officer will be to:
 - Attend liaison meetings where applicable between the LA and DM making effective contributions towards closer working.
 - Deal with any queries effectively that cannot be resolved by the usual channels.
 - Resolve problems by contact with opposite number in LA or DM.
 - Promote good liaison by identifying and arranging for exchange visits (where agreed and practicable) training sessions and exchange of information, including details of known changes etc.
 - Provide up to date lists of telephone numbers and contact points.
 - Foster good working relationships with all parties.
 - Take a pro-active role in cascading information throughout DM/LA sites.
 - Gather information and statistics to monitor PA performance.

Reviews and Disagreements Relating to the Debt Management and Local Authority Partnership Agreement (Appendix 4)

Reviews

The Partnership Agreement will apply from April to March each year beginning as soon as practicable after each April. This will provide DM and LAs with greater consistency when monitoring and ensuring sign-off of the PA. Monitoring of the performance of the PA will be required throughout the year with a full joint review towards the end of the period. A review at national level will take place to ensure consistency.

The national review to develop this Agreement for 2007/8 will be set up in Dec 2006, aiming to be completed by the end of February 2007. This review will address developing business requirements. Including service arrangements and resourcing, amending the Partnership Agreement accordingly. Any amended agreement will need to be approved by the Practitioners Operational Group.

Disagreements

It is important that disagreements are resolved at the ***lowest practicable level***, i.e. the individual benefit processors, overpayment officers. It is expected that most issues, which arise, will be resolved through informal discussions with colleagues or during routine liaison. Where it does not prove possible to resolve an issue through these means, it should be referred to the nominated liaison officers (see heading Nominated officers) who may need to escalate to national level to ensure consistency of approach. (DM and LA).

***NATIONAL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT
FOR SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS***

BETWEEN

**THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS'
SERVICE DELIVERY BUSINESSES**

AND

**LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING BENEFIT/COUNCIL
TAX BENEFIT SERVICES**

2006/2007

National Framework Agreement (Background)

1. This National Framework Agreement recognises that there will be a requirement for a number of the businesses that collectively form The DWP to enter into Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that describe the day to day working practices and standards between those businesses and LAs.
2. This Framework document lays down the overarching common principles that should be embraced in each of the individual SLAs. This will help to create a greater focus on working together to understand any issues that may arise, and promoting liaison as the means of resolving them, rather than merely laying down standards that are required to be met.
3. DWP SLAs that are covered by these overarching principles are:
 - The Pension Service (TPS)
 - Jobcentre Plus (JCP)
 - Disability Carers Service (DCS)
 - The Appeals Service (until transfer to DCA)
 - Financial Services Division – Debt Management (DM)
 - Rent Service (DWP Agency from 01/04/2004)

This document has been endorsed by the Local Authority Associations (LGA, WLGA, ALG, and COSLA)

Local Authorities

4. The LA have a key role in supporting government objectives in relation to placing people in work and removing people from poverty through delivery of Housing and Council Tax Benefit (CTB). Housing Benefit (HB) is an important part of welfare provision designed to enable people on lower incomes access to a decent home. It also plays a key part in enabling people to make the transition from welfare into work.

Department for Work and Pensions

5. DWP is committed to eradicating poverty for children, combating pensioner poverty and sustaining a higher proportion of people in work than ever before, whilst providing security for those who can't work. DWP has been created specifically to improve and tailor services to customers.

The Pension Service

6. The aim of The Pension Service is to combat poverty and promote security and independence for today's and future pensioners. In addition, The Pension Service will develop and implement local services through a local service plan that will be co-terminus with LA boundaries. These plans will involve a range of partners including LAs.

Jobcentre Plus

7. The aim of Jobcentre Plus is to help more people into work, help employers fill their vacancies, and to provide people of working age with the help and support to which they are entitled. An important feature of the organisation will be the alignment of Jobcentre Plus and LA boundaries. This development should bring benefits for DWP, LAs and our common customers.

Disability and Carers Service

8. Disability and Carers Service (DCS) exists to support disabled people and their carers, whether or not they are able to work, by providing an efficient and customer-focused delivery of Disability and Carer Benefits, payable to just fewer than 4.5 million customers.

The Appeals Service

9. The Appeals Service hears appeals on decisions on Social Security benefits, Child Support, Vaccine Damage, Tax Credit, HB, CTB and Compensation Recovery questions throughout Great Britain and on decisions under the Road Traffic Act in England and Wales.

Financial Services Division – DM

10. DM is the organisation responsible for delivering debt management and recovery service for the DWP; this responsibility includes, in certain circumstances, the recovery of HB/CTB overpayment on behalf of LAs. DM has overall responsibility to support the DWP in the reduction in losses from fraud and error in programme spends, by the efficient and effective collection of debt. Service delivery requirements and standards are in the attached appendices.

The Rent Service

11. The Rent Service (TRS) is an executive agency of the DWP. We aim to be England's leading provider of impartial, professional rental valuation services that are fair to our customers and other stakeholders. TRS makes fair rent evaluations for regulated and secure tenancies, and determines whether **HB** customers (and prospective customers) are being asked to pay more rent than their landlords might reasonably expect in open market conditions.

The Purpose of SLAs

12. The SLAs described in this document are intended to improve quality of services and secure application of minimum standards by the parties to the agreements. The SLAs also encourage closer working through dialogue and liaison and the development of a better understanding of our procedures in order to provide the best possible customer experience. Whilst individual SLAs will set out the minimum standards but both parties are encouraged to build on the SLAs to reflect local needs.

Reviews and Disagreements

13. All SLAs must contain arrangements for monitoring performance throughout the year plus arrangements for a full joint review of progress at the end of the business year. SLAs should run from April to March. It is important that a process for resolving disagreements at the lowest practicable level is described in all SLAs.

Monitoring Arrangements

14. Monitoring of the arrangements set out in the SLA in relation to performance against minimum standards and day to day liaison arrangements is essential. It is important that where minimum standards are not being achieved that this is not used as a reason to refuse to sign the SLA. The SLA should be used as a vehicle to promote dialogue to achieve the minimum standards or to agree the actions required to reach the standards as soon as possible. Liaison arrangements are the key feature of all SLAs and these arrangements should be regularly monitored to ensure that in ever changing circumstances they meet the needs of all parties.

Nominated Officers

15. Each party to an SLA should appoint a nominated officer to whom day-to-day problems can be addressed. This officer can also be the conduit for ensuring that any disagreements are handled at the most appropriate level. The appointed officer should also take responsibility for ensuring that full contact details are provided where issues need to be escalated. This will allow day to day business between the parties to be expedited in the most efficient manner.

Cross Referral to other SLAs

16. All parties need to note that where it is necessary to cross refer to arrangements specified in another organisation's SLA it is not acceptable to say "See.....SLA". The actual process to be conveyed must be detailed in each SLA.

Principles of Sign-Up

17. All parties should do everything in their power to establish the necessary dialogue and create the correct circumstances that will lead to sign-up of the SLAs. This must involve discussion regarding day-to-day liaison, minimum standards, monitoring and disagreement procedures.

Future Arrangements

18. As individual DWP Businesses evolve and closer working arrangements between DWP Businesses and LA become better established, individual SLAs and this framework document will need to change. It is important that the Businesses recognise that changes to individual model SLAs or this document require clearance through the Practitioners Operational Group (POG).

Partnership Agreement between Debt Management and Local Authority Housing Benefit 2006/7

Signed on behalf of Debt Management

..... (Name of Debt Centre)

..... (Name of signatory)

Signed on behalf of the Local Authority Housing Benefit

..... (Name of Local Authority)

..... (Name of signatory)

Date