

Housing Benefit Direct.....

May 2008

Issue 77

Editorial

Paul Howarth has, for now, been promoted to lead the Benefit Strategy Directorate in DWP (of which Housing Benefit Strategy Division is a part). The two of us are temporarily covering Paul's former duties which includes taking on the task of writing this month's editorial.



The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) went live last month and by all reports it has gone very smoothly, so congratulations to all involved. We are currently working on making the transition in DWP from having a LHA implementation project to moving into live running and will let you know who to contact if details change. As you will see from this month's edition, even with the LHA going live there is still a lot of other activity affecting HB. For example, we expect to provide tax credit data on CIS from 30 June 2008 and, from October 2008, there will be further simplifications to the claim process for pensioners claiming HB/CTB via The Pension Service.

Finally, you may have noticed in the Budget announcement that the Government will be undertaking a comprehensive review of the working age HB system, to look at its effectiveness, particularly in promoting work incentives, efficiency and fairness and to ensure that it represents value for money for the taxpayer. The HB review is a joint internal review that is being taken forward by HMT and DWP and there are no plans to publish formal terms of reference. The review will report to Ministers and conclude towards the end of this calendar year.

Danielle Wells and Cathy Payne, Heads of Housing Benefit Strategy Division
Email: ☎ Danielle.Wells@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or Cathy.Payne@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Electronic Transfer of HB/CTB claim data to Local Authorities Project (e-Transfer Project)

Part of the Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme (HBIFP), the e-Transfer Project, is developing ways to forward HB/CTB claim data gathered by DWP, as part of the integrated new claims process, electronically rather than by hard copy.



The electronic transfer process will provide a secure method of transferring claim information to you ensuring it is received the day after it is dispatched by DWP. This will contribute towards improving customer service by reducing end to end processing times and simplify the existing system for staff.

First we are going to facilitate the electronic transfer of HB/CTB claim data from Jobcentre Plus via the Customer Management System (CMS) to you from November 2008. This will mean that you will no longer receive the Local Authority Input Document (LAID) via post or courier but will receive an electronic LAID in Portable Document Format (PDF). There will be no change to the style or content of the LAID.

This will be followed in April 2009 by the electronic transfer of HB/CTB claim data from The Pension Service via the Customer Account Management System (CAM).

More information will be provided at the Local Authority Delivery Events that are to be held in May and June 2008, and further updates will be included in future editions of HB Direct.

If you have any queries, please contact Janet Croll on the HB Information Flows Programme

☎ Janet.croll@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

New Regulations

New sets of regulations were laid before Parliament in April. Your Local Authority Associations have been consulted and support both these sets of regulations. Fuller details on these regulations were published in *HB/CTB Bulletin G8/2008*.



Reform of Extended Payments

The Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (Extended Payment) Amendment Regulations 2008 (SI 2008/959). Coming into force 6 October 2008.

These Regulations reform the Extended Payment Schemes. In the main, the qualifying conditions will be the same as those in the existing schemes. The main features of the reformed schemes will be:

- there will be no need to end the existing HB/CTB award to enable an Extended Payment to be made;
- there will be no need for customers to claim an Extended Payment. You will need to consider an Extended Payment as part of the normal change of circumstances procedures when a customer starts work.

Contact for queries ☎ phillipa.fallowfield@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Disregard of child maintenance

The Social Security (Miscellaneous)(No.2) Regulations 2008 (SI 2008/1042). Coming into force 19 May 2008, and 27 October 2008 (for the child maintenance disregard).

These contain a number of amendments to correct errors, remove otiose references and improve the drafting of the 2006 HB and CTB Regulations, but the main change in this set is an increase in the child maintenance disregard from £15 per week to a full disregard in HB and CTB.

Contact for queries: ☎ richard.metcalfe@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



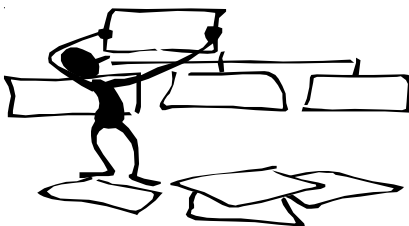
Update on Employment Support Allowance

The regulations containing the amendments to HB/CTB consequential to the introduction of ESA were laid before Parliament on 18 April 2008. They will come into force on 27 October 2008 and reflect the enhancement made to the ESA provisions that members of the Support Group will have automatic entitlement to the Enhanced Disability Premium.

Contact for queries: ☎ christine.watkins@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Comprehensive guidance on all the changes to HB/CTB is currently being prepared. We aim to issue it by the end of May.

Proposed change to backdating rules



We are proposing to change the current rules on backdating for HB/CTB, reducing the current period for backdating a claim from 52 weeks to three months. This will affect all customers of working age, and will take effect from October 2008. In addition, to ensure consistency of rules, the time for claiming HB/CTB alongside Pension Credit will be reduced from 12 to three months for all customers of pension age.

The proposals still have to go through the normal parliamentary process, and consideration by the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC). SSAC are currently consulting on these proposals and details can be found on their website at http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/consultation_0408.pdf. We are also consulting with the Local Authority Associations and have asked for comments by 9 May 2008. If you have any comments on the proposals please feed them in.

If the proposals go ahead it will be important that customers are given appropriate information at an early stage regarding their entitlement. Customers who may be entitled to more than three months backdated payment should be encouraged to get their claim in before October 2008. Landlords should make sure that rent arrears are tackled at an early stage, as this often leads to claim for backdated HB/CTB. And tenants who are starting to build up arrears of rent should be advised about HB/CTB in case they are entitled to benefit. Making sure claims are made in good time will reduce the need for backdated awards.

For further information, contact ☎ carol.foster-middleton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Tax Credit Data on CIS

Work is progressing to provide Tax Credit (TC) data on the Customer Information System (CIS) ready for Go Live on 30 June 2008.

CIS will display TC information in the Award Details Screen. This will include details of a customer Tax Credit Award Notice (TCAN) for the current year and for the next year if appropriate.

You will be able to identify customers who have been awarded Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit including any of the associated elements e.g. Baby Element. CIS will also show customers' payment schedules, including pay dates and amounts. Each time a TCAN is issued by HMRC, an update will be sent to CIS overnight and the details will be displayed the following day.

The LA CIS training and guidance will be amended to include TC details and a desk aid will be produced to assist your staff. More information will be provided at the LA Delivery Events that are being held in May and June. Further updates will be included in future editions of HB Direct and General Bulletins.

In the meantime if you have any queries please contact Jo Wood ([✉ Jo.wood@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Jo.wood@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)) on the HB Information Flows Programme.

Simpler HB/CTB for older People from October 2008

On 5 December 2007 the Government announced changes that will further simplify benefits for pensioners and make the benefits system less intrusive.

One of these changes means that, from October 2008, Pension Credit customers will be able to claim HB/CTB over the telephone via The Pension Service. The information gathered will be forwarded automatically to the appropriate local authority for HB/CTB processing at the point the Pension Credit application is assessed. The customer will not need to complete, sign or send the form themselves.

All Benefit Managers received a letter in January 2008 advising them of the changes, and during March we followed this up with an invitation to attend Delivery Events during May or June. These regionally- based events will be used to give you more detailed information about the changes and what they will mean for you. We will also be distributing Briefing Packs.

Attendance is encouraged at these events to help you understand the changes and give you the opportunity to raise any questions.

For more information please contact us at [✉ HB/CTB.NEWPROCESSQUERIES@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK](mailto:HB/CTB.NEWPROCESSQUERIES@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK)

Reforming HB subsidy for customers in temporary accommodation

Further to subsidy *HB/CTB Circular S5/2007* (issued November 2007, paras. 9-10) we are still developing proposals to reform Housing Benefit subsidy for customers living in temporary accommodation.

One of the key objectives for reform is to ensure that customers in temporary accommodation are charged reasonable, market-level rents by changing the level of subsidy you receive for the rent element and seeking to separate out local authorities' management costs.

A temporary accommodation working group was set up in January 2008 with Local Authority Associations and other experts from regional and central government and has been meeting regularly. Its purpose is to explore options for reform and to highlight any risks and benefits associated with them.

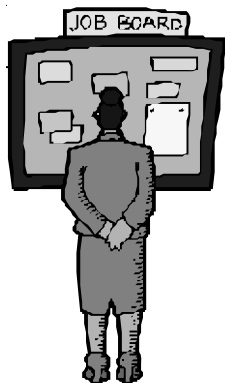
No decisions concerning the design of the new scheme have yet been made. We will let you know more in the coming months but expect to be in a position to enter the formal consultation stage with Local Authority Associations later this year.

We had initially envisaged an April 2009 implementation date, but the complexity of the issues and the need to get the proposals right means that this is not now possible. The current threshold and cap arrangements will continue for 2009/10 and we will be considering the levels of the thresholds and caps in the near future. Consultation with your Local Authority Associations will continue on the reforms of temporary accommodation for their introduction in April 2010.

For further information, contact joseph.stacey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Secondment opportunity - In and Out of Work Project

Are you looking for a new challenge in 2008 at the heart of cross government working? Then read on.



We are an expanding joint project team consisting of DWP, HMRC and Local Authority colleagues delivering improved customer service to customers moving in and out of work. Following successful live running of 6 pilot sites, significant customer improvements have been achieved and consequently we will soon be holding discussions with the Local Authority Associations on national roll out of the processes.

We are looking for a proactive, positive individual who has a good working knowledge of Housing Benefit processes and the interfaces with Jobcentre Plus to join our team on secondment. The applicant should be someone who is flexible, adaptable and prepared to fully integrate into our Project Team (and that means being asked to pick up a variety of work), but primarily the focus would be in the following areas

- Developing relationships across DWP/HMRC and LAs to facilitate the successful roll out and ensure project objectives are met.
- Representing LA interests and bringing knowledge to the table of implementation issues, planning requirements, processes etc.
- Stakeholder management including LA Chief executives and other LA stakeholders
- Providing practical help and support in the development of products for national roll out
- Support the Project Manager to develop solutions and resolve issues and risks

This is a high profile role in an exciting area of work that would provide the right individual with an excellent opportunity to develop further their experience and skills. Having the right approach and background experience is more important to us than current grade or position.

Location: Preferably Leeds, Lytham or London with frequent travel and some overnight stays required.

Duration: Starting as soon as possible – and likely to last 12 to 18 months.

For further information please contact Steve Dunn on ☎ **0113 2327690** or email your CV to him at 📧 **steve.dunn@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk**

Closing Date is Friday 16 May 2008

HBDMS Leads the Way in Secure Data Transfer

The risks associated with moving large quantities of personal data between public bodies have been well publicised in the media over recent months. As a precaution many transfers were suspended in November 2007 while more secure solutions were sought. DWP has met this challenge by adopting a range of products to protect data in transit. One of these is a desktop software solution called PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) which encrypts the file of data which needs to be sent and attaches it to an ordinary email. The encrypted data is incomprehensible to anyone who intercepts the email and opens the file unless they have the appropriate de-encryption key .

Back in February the Housing Benefit Data Matching Service (HBDMS) was chosen as the first service within DWP to utilise this technology. Ministers set the project the challenging timescale of resuming the service by 31 March 2008. Over the next seven weeks a small Project team of IT and HBDMS staff sent the PGP software and associated operating procedures and guides to 408 authorities and via an appointments system assisted them in installing it. The HBDMS service then resumed ahead of schedule on 28 March 2008 and in the following two weeks identified almost £1,000,000 in potential overpayments.

During April we have continued to deal with issues and queries. However, the team was disbanded at the end of April.

Brian Waldie, HBMS Operations Manager says: “The successful roll out of PGP encryption by the project will allow HBMS to recommence ‘business as usual’ with LAs, in the knowledge that the transfer of personal data is secure”.

Fidelma O’Reilly the DWP Project Manager added: “ PGP is a great product and the roll out to LAs went really well, however it would have been impossible in the timescales we were set without the patience and support of IT & HB staff in local authorities across the country who we owe a massive thank you”.

From 1 May 2008 all PGP faults should be reported through the PGP portal, 🌐 **<http://support.pgp.com>**, all other queries regarding the HBDMS Service should now be directed to **Margaret Jackson** on ☎ **01253 688526**

