

Housing Benefit Direct.....

June 2008

Issue 78

Editorial

This edition of HB Direct provides advice on a number of Local Housing Allowance related issues as well as updating you on the latest CMS release and some DWP HB-related research.



The research includes information about reporting changes of circumstances and tackling error. This is a well timed report as you may have noticed that the latest figures on fraud and error across the whole benefit system were published on 15 May. The results for Housing Benefit are very good. They show that local authorities continue to make good progress in tackling fraud, which has fallen by almost 50 per cent since 2002/3. In addition, previous increases in customer error have also been successfully tackled with the latest figures showing a 16 per cent reduction in the last 18 months. This is a significant achievement so well done to all involved in identifying fraud and helping drive down error.

A final mention to the series of road shows that DWP is currently delivering for local authority benefit staff. There are a few events left to run in London (this week), Manchester and Birmingham. They will cover changes to the Pension Service claim process, Government Connect and the new IT being developed by DWP to provide information to local authorities electronically.

If you are interested in coming to one of these events please e-mail [✉ dave.hilton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:dave.hilton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

Cathy Payne, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division
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Government Connect

On 1 April 2008, the permanent secretaries of DWP, DCLG and DCSF wrote to all local authority Chief Executives announcing the Government Connect network (GCSx) as the preferred network for data transfer between local and central government and also announced the plan to phase out tactical and less secure communication methods.



To support LAs moving to GCSx the letter announced funding for the secure connection for every local authority until 31 March 2011. This funding covers the installation and running costs for this period.

The project team, now led by the DWP, is planning to complete the installation of GCSx connections in all local authorities by 1 April 2009. There is a five-stage implementation process for this that can be briefly described as follows

- sign up for the service
- have local IT security issues reviewed
- ensure any security issues are resolved
- sign the necessary contracts
- complete local IT configuration work

Most LAs have now reached at least the second stage but a relatively small number have yet to sign up. The project team will be contacting these local authorities directly.

To ensure your local authority moves to GCSx in time you should check with your ICT team to ensure that they have begun the implementation process. If your authority needs any assistance in this process they should go to www.govconnect.gov.uk or contact [✉ gctechteam@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:gctechteam@communities.gsi.gov.uk)

Improving customer service: Aylesbury Vale District Council

The Performance Development Team (PDT) works with individual and groups of LAs to help them become more efficient and improve performance. Part of its role involves visiting LAs that perform well to find and spread good practice within the local authority community.

PDT recently visited **Aylesbury Vale District Council** to look at changes made to its claims process.

Jacqueline Reed, who is a Managing Consultant with PDT said, "*Aylesbury had implemented some innovative new practices which had vastly improved customer service and processing times, at the same time as actually reducing costs.*"



Jeff Membury, Aylesbury's Benefits Manager explains how they achieved this improvement.

"We realised that our staff spent a lot of time writing to customers to request and chase up information for new claims. We decided that there must be a better way of doing things. After consulting with landlords, voluntary agencies and support groups we totally changed the way we deal with new claims.

When a customer contacts us wanting to make a new claim, they are now offered the option of a 'tele-claim'. This involves telephoning the customer at a specified time, completing a claim with them over the telephone and agreeing a date for us to visit them to get the form signed and collect all the necessary evidence. These visits are normally arranged for the following morning and, if the customer has all the evidence needed, the officer who visited the customer will process the claim the same afternoon.

We also offer to visit customers to collect any outstanding evidence and to answer any questions they might have when we receive a paper claim.

Where we visit customers 55-60% have all the necessary evidence and we can process the claim that afternoon. This has been a significant contribution to reducing our new claims processing times to under 17 days. We regularly receive written compliments on both the helpfulness of the benefits staff and the speed at which we process claims.

Perhaps the most surprising benefit is that, although visiting is labour intensive, the time saved not having to write out again and again for supporting evidence means that we did not have to increase the number of staff in benefits. In fact the numbers have reduced, helping us become more efficient".

For more information or help

For more information about tele-claims, please contact **Jeff Membury** by email: [✉ jmembury@aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk](mailto:jmembury@aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk) or if you would like help from PDT contact **Cheryl Weaver** by email: [✉ cheryl.weaver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:cheryl.weaver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

LHA Adviceline

During the run up to the implementation of LHA we provided a dedicated email address which we hope provided assistance with your queries regarding LHA.

Now that LHA has been incorporated into your normal working practices and procedures, we have found that the number of queries being received has reduced. Good news for us as you are obviously becoming experts in this field and the dedicated email address is becoming obsolete.

We have therefore made the decision that **the LHA Adviceline will be closed down from the end of June 2008**. We have already placed an auto reply on the address to advise you all of this but for those of you who haven't had any queries lately, we would hate for you to ask for help only to find that your email bounces back.

From the end of June you should direct your enquiries through the relevant person identifiable from the DWP website at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/contact/contact-list.pdf>

Please **don't** use the contacts that are currently available as this list will be updated in June to reflect the new contact for LHA.



Customer Management System Release 8

Release 8.0 scheduled for delivery on 9 June 2008 builds on the successful implementation of previous releases by introducing a number of initiatives that will have a **direct impact upon local authorities**.

Introduction of Local Housing Allowance

- Reduces the number of scripted questions for private tenants. It also makes associated changes to the information presented on the Local Authority Input Document

CMS Script Improvements

- Enforces script improvements to ensure that appropriate trigger questions are asked, activating further questions required to support HB/CTB claims
- Advises appropriate customers that they need to provide tenancy agreements and details of any non-dependants income

New CMS questions will directly assist HB/CTB Claims, will establish

- if the customer and/or partner are receiving Statutory Adoption Pay and Statutory Paternity Pay
- details of other money coming into the household, and
- how the customer and/or partner are paid their wages

The *HB/CTB General Information Bulletin* to be published 9 June 2008 will provide a full explanation of the changes being introduced by CMS Release 8 and how these will impact the HB/CTB claims process.

Further information is available from [✉ HBSDMP.WWEG@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK](mailto:HBSDMP.WWEG@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK)

Local Housing Allowance - withdrawal of claims

Following the roll out of LHA on 7 April 2008, many of you have asked whether the existing customers can transfer their housing benefit claims on to LHA. Most of the inquiries have been along the lines that a customer wants to withdraw the current claim that is assessed under the rent referral scheme and re-claim housing benefit after a weeks break so that their claim could be assessed under the LHA scheme.

We have already provided information on this subject in *HB/CTB Bulletin G10/2008* that was issued on 21 May 2008.

For customers who withdraw their benefit claims there would be a minimum period of one week before benefit could be reinstated as a Local Housing Allowance claim. Customers should be advised about the processing times as experienced in your offices as their new claims would be processed with all other new claims being received.

Backdated benefit and LHA

We have received a number of queries regarding backdated benefit for LHA where you would like clarification of the process.

We explained the policy intention on this area in the *Housing Benefit Direct, LHA Special Supplement* issued November 2007 so, rather than repeating the information we have already published, we would appreciate it if you would take a look at the supplement which should answer your queries. For those of you who have not seen the supplement please go to [✉ http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/news/newsletter/2007/hb-direct-lha-special-nov07.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/news/newsletter/2007/hb-direct-lha-special-nov07.pdf)

Queries

If you have any further queries, please direct them, for the time being, to [✉ LHAadvice@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:LHAadvice@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

Summary and Final reports for 'Reporting Changes in Circumstances: Tackling Error in the Benefits System'

The **summary and final reports** for the publication, *Reporting Changes in Circumstances: Tackling Error in the Benefits System*, will be **available for download** from the DWP website on **Tuesday 10 June 2008**.

You can find the

- **summary** report at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/summ2007-2008/497summ.pdf>
- **final** report at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep497.pdf>

Following is brief supportive information

Reporting Changes in Circumstances: Tackling Error in the Benefits System

By - Annie Irvine, Jacqueline Davidson and Roy Sainsbury

Since 1997 successive governments have pursued a range of policies to reduce the amount of money lost to the social security budget through fraud and error. While levels of fraud have consistently decreased, the problem of error has persisted and its reduction has therefore become an important policy objective.

Qualitative research was carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York in 2006-07 to explore benefit claimants' knowledge and understanding concerning changes in circumstances and obligations to report them. This research was based on a longitudinal panel of 51 claimants who were interviewed three times over the course of nine months.

The objectives of the overall study were focused on the key areas of

- how claimants experience changes in circumstances
- their knowledge and perceptions about reporting changes in circumstances
- their sources of knowledge
- their experiences of reporting changes
- experiences and responses to overpayment recovery due to error

If you have any queries please contact **Richard Zaluski-Zaluczkowski**

tel: ☎ **020 7712 2145** or email Richard at

✉ richard.zaluski-zaluczkowski@dwp.gsi.gov.uk



If only you'd asked!

How do you know which customers haven't reported changes in their circumstances? Well, the Risk Based Review list from HBDMS identifies the type of customer most likely to have had a recent change.

However, new research that we're currently working on looks at customers' behaviour, regardless of their risk score.

We've noticed that people whose claims you've reviewed within the last 18 months, where the review identified an unreported change that affected their HB entitlement, are **more** likely to have had another unreported change since then. Why? We don't know the answer to that, but it may simply be that they just wait until you contact them before telling you about any changes.

All the more reason, when you do find an unreported change, to emphasise to customers that **they** have to report changes to **you** and not wait to be asked!

We'll share the results of this research with you on our website in due course to help you plan your activities more effectively.

You can find our website at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/fraud-error.asp>

Local Authority Omnibus Survey, Summary report for wave-16



The **summary report** for wave-16 of the Local Authority Omnibus Survey will be **available for download** from the DWP website on **Tuesday, 10 June 2008**.

You can find the wave-16 summary report at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/summ2007-2008/501summ.pdf>

The survey sections for wave-16 were

- Section A: Backdating and Paying Housing Benefit
- Section B: Information (HBSD-IAD & HBMS scans)
- Section C: Local Housing Allowance (LHA)
- Section D: General counter-fraud and error work
- Section E: DWP Prosecution Division
- Section F: Decentralisation and Contact Information

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