I hope you all had a good break over Christmas and have now recovered from the New Year celebrations! I appreciate just how busy the coming months are likely to be for you all, and of course 2008 is a very significant year for Housing Benefit reform. I am sure you are all well-advanced with your plans to implement the Local Housing Allowance. I know the LHA team here in the Adelphi have been exceptionally busy with preparing further guidance and dealing with queries. In this edition, you’ll find more about basic bank accounts and how you can find out what is available. I’ve said for some time that one of the most positive outcomes from the LHA in the Pathfinders has been the number of customers who have opened a bank account for the first time, sometimes specifically to have their LHA paid into it. This is actively supporting the Government’s wide-ranging programme on financial inclusion. It is clear that we have a real opportunity to make a real difference here, by supporting people become more financially independent and aware. I hope you will find this information helpful. And don’t forget we are here to help as much as we can. If you are looking for help in any way and haven’t been able to find it yet do get in touch with us on the LHA advice line. Later in the year we will also start implementing the new Employment and Support Allowance. We are working hard on this too, and will now be coming out with more regular updates.

I know you will be wondering when we will be in a position to restore our data-matching service. I can assure you that we are doing all we can to get this running again soon. I’m sure you’ll agree that both DWP and local authorities need to be satisfied about the level of security we should have when transferring personal data. I am hoping to write to you again very soon about our plans, including the impact on PM10 and other measures.

Finally, I was very pleased to see many of you from Scotland at the IRRV Scottish benefits conference at Crieff. This is always a festive occasion and this year was no exception – even if, at my age, my disco dancing has little to recommend it! Of course we had some lively debates about some current issues, as you would expect, but I found it very encouraging to find such a positive attitude overall.

Best wishes for 2008.

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division
Email: Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Housing Costs Roadshows

This is to remind Benefit Managers that we will be delivering a series of Housing Costs Roadshows to local authorities in January and February 2008. General Information Bulletin 21/2007 gave the details.

If your local authority has not yet booked two places, please go to www.keystone-group.co.uk/dwproadshows for more information and to register.
The implementation date for the LHA is fast approaching. You are, of course, aware by now that an important part of this scheme is that most customers will be paid directly and ideally customers should be paid directly into their own bank accounts.

**Basic Bank Accounts - identification**

Task sheet LA12 provided you with best practice information on improving access to bank accounts for customers. Clearly, this is an important part of the scheme, and we want to do all we can to encourage customers to open accounts. Although this is an issue that needs to be undertaken at local level, we have been in contact with the British Bankers Association to facilitate this as far as we can.

Having suitable identification with which to open an account can be an issue for some customers. Many of you have started providing a verification letter to customers which many local banks are now prepared to accept as suitable identification. Although we can’t reproduce a template of the sort of letter that may be required here, we are happy to provide local authorities this template via our LHA advice line (based on something kindly provided by L B Merton). The important point to note here is that it is essential that you undertake the appropriate verification checks before issuing any such letters to your customers. We would also strongly recommend you get in touch with your local banks prior to the introduction of the LHA. For security purposes, you should provide banks with a list of authorised signatory’s prior to issuing identification letters. Although this does not guarantee that individual organisations will open bank accounts for individuals, we certainly hope this approach will be useful. The British Bankers Association have agreed to raise awareness of the introduction of LHA amongst their members, and support our template of a Housing Benefit entitlement letter as a useful tool in helping customers prove their identity and open a bank account.

**Where to open a basic bank account?**

You are aware that it is not appropriate to promote any particular organisations as a suitable banking facility. However, what we can do is provide information to customers on the choices that are available to them to open a basic bank account.

We have also met with the Financial Services Authority who, as you may know, produce a leaflet setting out information about basic bank accounts and their uses. The leaflet, called Basic bank accounts, gives details of all the organisations that currently offer basic bank accounts. Most importantly, it is updated quarterly to give members of the public a useful indication of where to go to open an account.

You can order free copies from the FSA website: [http://www.moneymadeclear.fsa.gov.uk/tools/online_order_form.html](http://www.moneymadeclear.fsa.gov.uk/tools/online_order_form.html)

Or by calling their Consumer Helpline on
Tel: [0845 606 1234](tel:0845%20606%201234) (all rates may vary).

This leaflet will be updated around the end of January, so you may want to wait until then before ordering your copies.

We hope this information is useful, but if you need any further information, or would like a copy of the identification template, please contact us at our LHA advice line.
Consultation on new benefits inspection

The Audit Commission takes on responsibilities for Housing and Council Tax Benefit assurance, including inspection, from 1 April 2008. Taking on this new responsibility will enable it, over time, to better integrate our benefit work across inspections, data quality work, benefit subsidy claim certification, the NFI (National Fraud Initiative), direction of travel and use of resources.

The Commission expects to undertake around 35 inspections in 2008/09, in authorities where there is evidence of under-performance or a risk of under-performance.

Drawing on the learning from the benefit pilot inspections, the Commission has developed draft descriptors to inform any inspections of benefit services it undertakes. The descriptors form part of our key lines of enquiry (KLOE) document. The Commission’s inspectors will use them to reach their judgement on how good the benefit service is.

The Commission would welcome your comments on the draft benefit descriptors, the proposed focus for our benefit inspections, and the sources of evidence we suggest we might use. All these are in the new KLOE document.

Please note that the Commission is not inviting comments on the Judgement 2 descriptors which support questions four, five and six, the two headline judgements, the six main questions or the detailed KLOE questions. These form part of the Commission’s standard approach to service inspections and it consulted on these in 2004.

Responses to this consultation should be clearly headed ‘Benefits inspection consultation’ and sent to

Email: benefits@audit-commission.gov.uk

Post: Local Government Directorate – Hub 4, Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ


The application of the Commission’s approach to inspection to benefit services is different to the current BFI/DWP annual service assessment for benefits. The Commission’s inspections place greater emphasis on service outcomes and the service’s contributions to area-based priorities such as tackling poverty and inequality, and reducing worklessness. It focuses on the perspective of local citizens and users of services, and places less emphasis on process. Practitioners familiar with BFI’s approach will, understandably, see the new benefit inspection as a ‘harder test’.

If you have any questions about this consultation or the Audit Commission’s approach to benefits inspections

Email: benefits@audit-commission.gov.uk

Tel: Tim Savill, Benefit Policy Lead, 07876 144849

Learning and Development

Learning and Development will be moving their admin services from Hinchley Wood to a new site in Epsom at the end of January.

During the changeover you may experience some problems contacting L & D by phone and are advised to email admin

Email: maxine.dunne@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Whilst we are happy to include this article in HB Direct we are unable to endorse this product.

**Update - National Benefit Leaflets Project**

Look out for two new LHA leaflets on the National Benefit Leaflets website in late January/early February. There is one leaflet giving guidance for tenants and the other for landlords and agents.

Both leaflets will be in the same easy-to-read style that is proving popular with the thousands of customers who already use the site.

The National Leaflet Project is made possible by the 137 LAs who have realised that their £100 contribution to the project saves them the cost of internal design, Crystal Marking and printing.

Help us to keep this project going into 2008 by making a voluntary contribution of £100. You can then take advantage of the updated Working Age and Pension Age leaflets available from February as well as the two LHA leaflets.

If you would like to contribute or have any questions or comments, please go to

Website: [www.benefit-leaflets.org](http://www.benefit-leaflets.org)

Email: cara.duffield@dover.gov.uk

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**Local Authority Omnibus Survey, Summary & Final reports for wave-15**

The Summary and Final Reports for wave-15 of the LAs Omnibus Survey will be available for download from the DWP website on Tuesday 8 January 2008.

Please use the following URL address which points to the location of the wave-15


The survey sections for wave-15 were

- Section A: Making the Survey more relevant to LAs
- Section B: Information
- Section C: PM10
- Section D: Claimants contact with LAs
- Section E: LA Input Documents
- Section F: Charges/Recharges and Financial Training
- Section G: Decentralisation and Contact Information