It was good to see some of you again at the Beacon Council learning exchange event in Manchester on 14 June. I was very pleased to hear from both Blackpool Borough Council and Salford City Council about how they have transformed their benefit service.

Blackpool has put a tremendous effort into partnership working which has clearly paid dividends. In particular, they have been working very closely with Jobcentre Plus, as well as advice agencies and landlords. As one of the LHA pathfinders, the work with landlords has been particularly beneficial. Salford have in a comparatively short period of time vastly improved performance in their benefit service, through, amongst other things, major re-organisation, increased profile, more effective performance management and greater staff involvement. Like other authorities Salford has introduced home-working which in itself has clearly made a big difference. I would encourage as many of you as possible to attend some of the Beacon events which will now be held through the year, and to have a look at the IDeA website at http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=71885

Last week I was at Llandrindod Wells for the IRRV Wales Conference. As ever, I found this a useful and informative conference and another good opportunity to speak informally to some of you about your concerns. It was heartening to hear that implementation of the LHA seems to be going well, and is attracting a lot of interest outside the pathfinder authorities. Ministers will shortly decide which authorities (from the 67 who expressed an interest) will implement the LHA during 2005. We hope to invite around nine authorities from the shortlist and we will give you more information next month (see article inside). I know, both from this conference and elsewhere, that a major concern at the moment is the aftermath of ending benefit periods and the impact on the BVPIs of the shift from new claims to changes in circumstance. Further guidance on the issues covered in HB/CTB Circular A17/2004 will reach you very soon, and I intend to write to Chief Executives shortly about the impact on the changes in circumstance BVPI.

A while back we said that you could expect from May monthly HBMS scans with tax credit renewals information. We have had some problems retrieving regular and complete scans, and our HBMS team are working on a revised timetable to deliver the scans to you as soon as possible. We will try to resolve this urgently and keep you informed of all developments.

Finally, a couple of you noticed a small (but rather crucial!) error in one of my responses to a letter about tax credits in last month’s issue. I did of course mean to say that there is more for us to do. But I am glad that you are reading our newsletters carefully!

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

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**HB/CTB Model Training Modules**

The 2003/04 HB/CTB Training Modules were removed in error from the HB website. Apologies for any inconvenience this has caused. However, we can provide you with a CD Rom copy of the modules on request. Please contact Aeon Channer 020 7962 8506
Email: Aeon.Channer@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

We are currently updating the Training Modules for 2004/05 and we will advise you when the updated versions will be available on the website.

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**Pension Credit scans**

You should all by now be receiving the monthly Pension Credit scans, as an interim solution until the main problems with ETD can be fixed.

Although we have tried our best to ensure you receive these on a Monday to allow the possible maximum time for processing changes of circumstances, we understand that some of you are receiving this information later than anticipated. We have therefore agreed with your associations that any authority who receives this information later in the week can assume receipt on the following Monday.

I hope this will help ease the transitional period until a permanent fix is available.

Paul Howarth
Head of Housing Support Division
The Customer Management System

The Customer Management System (CMS) has now been rolled out in 135 Jobcentre Plus offices, impacting over 90 different local authorities across the country. We have undertaken some evaluation work on the early running of CMS in West Lothian Local Authority and Livingston Jobcentre Plus. A report was presented to your associations in April, and a paper detailing the key findings will shortly be available on the DWP website.

Further evaluation work on CMS will begin shortly. This new study is aimed at investigating authorities’ current experience of the CMS process and the results will feed into corresponding work due to be carried out within Jobcentre Plus. We are aware that some issues relating to adherence to standard processes have arisen, and this work will try to uncover more about these problems and will propose appropriate solutions. We will keep you updated on the outcomes of this work.

Rollout

The next stage of the rollout schedule is currently being finalised by the Jobcentre Plus Implementation team, and we hope to contact those of you who will be affected by late summer. In March we sent out a proforma to those of you who were not affected by the first stage of CMS rollout, asking that you identify for us the Jobcentre Plus offices that you are associated with. Having this data ensures that we can get accurate information to you in a timely manner. We would be grateful if you could return this proforma as soon as possible if you have not already done so. For further enquiries email sheena.parker@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

DWP website

The latest addition to the CMS information on our website is a District Contact List, which provides you with contact numbers for District Implementation teams in Jobcentre Plus. Your local Jobcentre Plus offices should be in contact with you before they go live with the System to discuss local arrangements. If this does not happen, or if you need some information about CMS implementation in your area please use these contact details. We do need to emphasise, however, that these numbers are only to be used for enquiries relating to CMS.

Clerical proformas

A number of you have asked us about the clerical proformas that should accompany a LA Input Document. The CMS1(LA) will only accompany an Input Document in some cases, while every Input Document should have a corresponding LA Questionnaire.

Can’t find information?

If you cannot find the information you require about CMS on the DWP website, http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/cms/index.asp please email either kerry.hartley1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or Kathy.brooks@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Overpayments performance indicator - Recovery of HB overpayments

In HB Direct Issue 22, we gave details of a review looking at simplifying the performance indicator that measures the percentage of recoverable HB overpayments recovered in the year.

We have recently consulted with your associations and are considering the points they have raised. We will keep you informed of further developments.

For queries please contact Jane.Autherson@dwp.gsi.gov.uk, or Aeon.Channer@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Secondment opportunity in Housing Benefit Security Division

By now many of you will have seen our secondment advert in HB/CTB Bulletin G3/2004. Many thanks to those of you who have already contacted us, and we welcome any further enquiries. The closing date is Wednesday 7 July 2004. Please note the successful candidate must be able to work from the Adelphi in London.

For further information please contact John Viggers tel: 020 7962 8819, or Jaya Karlekar tel: 020 7712 2876
Performance Standards Fund - don't miss out!

The HB/CTB Performance Standards Fund is now into its second year. Over 300 authorities have been awarded funding of more than £70m. This includes

- 120 authorities who have had funding for new benefit systems or DIP/workflow
- 77 authorities who have had funding for training officers
- 140 authorities who have had funding to recruit new staff, and
- more than 30 awards for joint working between authorities

We are aware that some benefit managers have not considered making an application because they think that only relatively poor performing authorities are eligible for funding. Although our main priority is still to improve claims processing times, we will consider any application that makes a good business case and will bring about improvements in your performance against the Performance Standards, for example, staff training and development improvements in customer service and take-up of benefits.

A good first step is to assess your performance against the Performance Standards, establish where you fall significantly below standard and then decide what it is you need to do to bring about improvements. The Performance Framework Team at the Adelphi is happy to discuss any potential applications.

Contact housing-support-standard@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

We will also run workshops for groups of LAs to discuss draft applications and explore ways of funding improvements.


We will be revising Circular S6/2003 shortly to include more information on projects for which we will consider funding.

If you have not applied for funding yet, remember that the fund ends in March 2006. We will not be able to pay for projects that are not completed by that date. So if you are thinking about replacing your benefits system or implementing an electronic document management system don't delay – get your application in!

Clare Mitton
Performance Framework Team

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Housing Benefit for people in temporary accommodation

You may be aware that we have been reviewing the HB rules for people placed in temporary accommodation (including local authority and housing association leases, bed and breakfast and licensed properties). The current rules have grown up without a clear policy underpinning them and there are different arrangements within the subsidy rules, for example, depending on who is actually doing the leasing. Our objectives for any reforms will be to ensure

- a consistent set of rules that reflect the reasonable cost of providing temporary accommodation
- they fit within the overall HB reform programme
- they support the Government’s wider aims including maintaining the progress that authorities have made in reducing the use of B&B accommodation
- where possible, they tackle barriers to work

We commissioned a company called SPARK to carry out research to look at the costs of temporary accommodation, and at the potential scope for a single set of HB rules for all types of temporary accommodation. This research has now been completed and publication is expected in the summer. The early findings from the research suggest that a “one size fits all” model might not be appropriate. We are aware of the other priorities you are facing over the year and have therefore agreed with Ministers that no major changes will be made to the current rules in April 2005. Instead, we will be considering some minor adjustments to the subsidy framework to iron out some of the inconsistencies in the way that the current system works.

As far as any potential longer term changes are concerned, we will explore all the options on an ongoing basis with colleagues in ODPM, The Rent Service and the Devolved Administrations. We are very clear that you must have long-term financial certainty when setting up leasing schemes and that existing leases would need to be protected under any future proposals for change. We will, of course, continue to keep your associations informed of developments.

For queries contact Maggie.Simpkin@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or telephone 020 79628268.
Local Authorities implementing LHA from April 2005

Last month we announced we had received well over 60 responses from authorities who had expressed an interest in implementing the LHA from April next year. Having received such a good selection of volunteers, we have developed a shortlist for Ministers to identify those authorities that are best placed to help us test out various operational issues. We are keen to ensure that all the major software suppliers have been included in the existing pathfinders and the additional group, as well as ensuring that we have included some very rural areas and a broad geographical spread of authorities. We hope to write out to successfully authorities, as well as those of you who expressed an interest, very soon.

Hazel Hobbs

LHA pathfinders

Our existing LHA pathfinders are progressing very well. It is still early days for any concrete findings but feedback so far has been very promising. An interim evaluation report is due at the end of this year which will provide a fuller picture of how LHA is working. We will continue to keep you informed of all developments.

Hazel Hobbs

Barriers to Work

I have recently received correspondence from an adviser working in the field of mental health services and employment who raised concerns that some authorities had not done enough to publicise the recent changes relating to the abolition of benefit periods and the extension of run ons to those customers in receipt of Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance.

I realise that the extent of change taking place in HB/CTB must impact on how you work issues into your publicity strategies. However I do think it is important to take this concern seriously. I would be grateful if you could give some thought about how best to publicise future changes, so the public and their representatives are fully aware of changes to them.

Paul Howarth
Head of HB Support Division

Calculating Tax Credits as income

As we reported in the last month’s issue, we have been looking at different options for turning Tax Credit awards into a weekly income for Housing Benefit. We have received a number of helpful suggestions, such as using the actual instalment amount received or a daily rate of tax credits. A number of options were discussed at the Tax Credit Working Group on 21 June. Following this meeting, we are working with Inland Revenue on practical considerations and will be seeking legal advice on possible solutions. Following this, we hope to consult more widely on a suggested way forward.

Cathy Payne

HB Verification Pilot

In HB Direct Issue 25 we gave details of the Housing Benefit Verification Pilot, which has been testing a process whereby Jobcentre Plus undertake a full HB/CTB claims gathering and verification process on your behalf.

The project team has now completed a thorough analysis of the pilot and Ministers would like to see this extended. Jobcentre Plus is keen to take this work on board, but due to the extensive change programme already underway, it is unlikely this will be implemented until at least April 2007.

If you wish to know more about the outcomes of the pilot please contact Colin Heward.
Email: Colin.Heward@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

DWP/BFI Review

In February’s edition of HB Direct, I mentioned the announcement that Chris Pond made at the IRRV Benefits Conference about a review into the way we inspect, monitor and support HB administration. This review has involved looking at the full range of activities we undertake, and how they can be improved.

One of our major concerns was that as most of the individual activities had built up over time, there was an overall lack of clarity in what we are aiming to achieve, and where authorities should go for help and advice. Your associations have been feeding into this review from the outset, as have all of the internal stakeholders in DWP and BFI.

All our proposals will, of course, have to be agreed by Ministers, but we hope to be in a position to provide you with details of our new, improved arrangements very soon.

Paul Howarth
Head of HB Support Division

Next month ...

In next month’s issue* look out for
• LHA
• more of your letters
• DWP/BFI Review

* Due to annual leave, this will be issued w/c 9 August.