Department for Work and Pensions working with LAs

Housing Benefit Direct......

For staff involved in the delivery of HB/CTB in Local Authorities

July 2005 Issue 43

Editorial

Our new Minister, James Plaskitt, has been busy getting to grips with the Housing Benefit agenda. On 9 June he attended a meeting with representatives of the nine pathfinder LAs who are implementing the Local Housing Allowance. Steve Carey, from Leeds City Council, gave an excellent presentation outlining the collective views of the pathfinders on their experiences so far. James Plaskitt was certainly impressed by the commitment shown by the pathfinders, the successful partnership working, and the clear articulation, by those most closely involved, of a range of issues we need to consider further. Then, on 15 June, James visited Brighton and Hove, and, again, he was clearly impressed by what he saw, particularly the evidence of better working relationships with key stakeholders such as Citizens Advice and Jobcentre Plus. All of this is very helpful in taking our reform programme forward.

Last week Tom Taylor and I continued our series of visits to LAs when we went to the London Borough of Waltham Forest. We were very impressed by the commitment of staff, both to improve performance generally (which they are doing) but also to finding news ways of organising their work to improve the service to the customer. We saw their contact centre in action, the main benefits processing area, and of course tried our best to answer some detailed and perceptive questions from all the staff.

Last month we published an advert for one of the several guides to the HB/CTB legislation that are available for your use. I thought I should clarify that, whilst we are happy to put such adverts in HB Direct if space permits, we cannot of course endorse any such products, other than our own guidance manual. Indeed, there are occasions when our interpretation of the law differs from that found in other guides. It is up to you what guidance you refer to in deciding claims, as long as you are satisfied that you are following the legislation. But we do hope that our own guidance will be your first port of call.

Finally, I am pleased that this month we are providing more information about some of the forthcoming changes we are making. We are committed to do this and hopefully you will find more articles of this sort in future. It is also very encouraging that the project to set up an email link between LAs and HMRC, previously Inland Revenue, has been implemented successfully. I do hope that this proves helpful.

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

HB/CTB Performance Standards Fund

In Issue 39 HB Direct March 2005, we announced a temporary halt to new awards from the Performance Standards Fund. We did this because we have now awarded around £150m and we need to decide how best to use the remainder of the Fund. We are still in the process of making those decisions but we want to assure you that we do intend to make further funding available to individual LAs. However, for the moment the halt on new bids remains in place.

In the meantime, we are contacting some of you who have not submitted progress reports on projects, many reports are over six months late. We must have details of your expenditure so we can manage the Fund properly and reallocate funds when projects have not gone ahead. So please check you have sent in your reports, the payment notification letters tell you when to submit them.

All applications received before the March deadline have now been processed. All decision letters for these applications will have been issued by early July.

Contact: Performance-Framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
In Issue 42 HB Direct June 2005, we updated you on work to align the HB/CTB date of claim with other benefits, and to allow the date of claim to be taken from the date of first contact. You will recall this was one of the measures announced in the Chancellor’s Budget in March 2005. We thought it would be helpful in this month’s HB Direct to update you on progress to introduce the other measures affecting HB/CTB announced in the Budget 2005. These measures were to

- abolish the notional income rule when a claimant chooses to defer receiving their personal pension beyond the age of 60
- remove the four week linking rule that applies to hospital downrating of the applicable amount
- remove an anomaly in CTB when a person on an income-related benefit moves in with a student householder
- disregard all arrears of Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit as capital for a period of 52 weeks
- align the rules between working-age and pensioner claimants to ensure that Discretionary Housing Payments are disregarded for 52 weeks

The measure relating to the notional income provisions affects all the income-related benefits so the HB/CTB changes will be included in a set of miscellaneous amendment regulations, due to come into force in April 2006.

The measure to remove the four week linking rule in hospital downrating also affects other benefits so will also be taken forward as a stand-alone package of amendments. The package is scheduled for introduction in April 2006.

The remaining provisions will be included in the package of regulations containing the amendments to the HB changes of circumstances provisions. Details of those proposed changes were included with the update provided in last month’s HB Direct.

Contact: ⚡️ Christine.Watkins@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Measure announced in the Budget 2005 – progress report

In a word ‘yes’ ☺ – but that would make for a very short article!

So far, nearly 370 LAs have sent in data for 2004/05. Based on this we know that

- you opened reviews on 950,000 cases in 2004/05 and that 650,000 of these have been completed
- 100,000 led to overpayments being detected whilst 50,000 detected underpayments
- the success rate for overpayment detection is running at nearly 16%
- the vast majority of reviews were undertaken by post or notified visit with both methods achieving a success rate at over 15%

We are very pleased with these results. We hope you agree that this fully justifies our decision to get rid of renewal claims.

On the downside, we know you have experienced software problems, which will have contributed to some of you not meeting the 40% reviews quota. We hope these problems have now been overcome and that those of you affected will be able to step up performance in 2005/06.

There are more improvements planned. HBMS are currently piloting, with your help, two scans targeting

- earnings
- dependants who have reached age 19

If these are successful, we will offer them to all LAs nationally and see how we can bring them into the Verification Framework.

Finally, you asked that reviews data should be posted on our DWP website. We are still working on this, but hope to be able to do so shortly.

For any enquiries relating to the risk-based reviews regime or ideas for HBMS scans, please contact us:

⚡️ Fraud-Error-Policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Good news!

We are glad to announce that the DCI 500 LA pilot has been a success. Feedback and further information will be issued in a circular shortly. If you have any queries please contact:

⚡️ Fraud-Error-Policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Risk-based reviews – are they working?

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Over half of all LAs meet new claims processing standard

On 16 June 2005 we published figures that show that for the first time more than half of you are meeting or beating the DWP target of 36 days for processing new claims. James Plaskitt, Housing Benefit Minister, was pleased to see this significant improvement in the number of LAs meeting the standard and praised the spectacular improvements in performance during 2004/05.

The number of LAs meeting the national standard of 36 days for processing new claims increased from 33% in 2003/04 to 50% in 2004/05 and to a very impressive 59% in the fourth quarter of 2004/05.

The average number of days to process new claims reduced from 50 in 2003/04 to 46 days in 2004/05 and to an equally impressive 39 days in the fourth quarter of 2004/05. Some of you have made very big improvements to beat the national standards, one in particular improved from 100 days to 16 days and another improved from 78 days to 33 days over a year.

LAs in the fourth quartile in the fourth quarter of 2004/05 took between 42 and 101 days compared with between 59 and 143 days in the same period in 2003/04.

Congratulations on such impressive improvements so far!

This is all down to your commitment and professionalism, so thank you.

The statistics can be found on the Department’s Information and Analysis website: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd1/hb_ctb/performance.asp

If you have any queries please contact Tony Withers on the LA Performance team:
Tel: 020 7712 2326
Email: Tony.Withers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Overpayments PI Definitions

The Best Value Performance Indicators 2005/06 Guide produced by the ODPM’s office in February 2005 contains an error in the title Percentage of Recoverable Overpayments (HB) and the descriptions provided at the start. Until the ODPM guidance is amended, please make sure you follow our guidance in the HB/CTB Management Information System (MIS) Guide.

There are two versions of the guide
• April 2005 to September 2005
• October 2005 to March 2006

To access the guide visit our new website dedicated to the collection of HB/CTB data: http://www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds

New contact details for Performance Standards and Performance Indicator queries

We have now set up a new email address to receive all Performance Indicator, and Performance Standards queries. Please email all your queries to:
Performance-Framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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**Impact of the Civil Partnership rules**

The legislation that will bring the Civil Partnership rules fully into effect across all benefits, including HB and CTB, is due to be laid this October and will come into force from 5 December 2005.

The effect of the new rules will be that same sex couples who register a civil partnership will acquire the same rights as married opposite sex couples. Same sex couples who do not register as civil partners will be treated in the same way as opposite sex couples who are not married. In general, therefore, affected couples will get less benefit than they do now.

In looking at how the Civil Partnership Act will affect HB/CTB, our main concern is that there should be minimal impact for you. Ideally, we want the new rules to take effect in a progressive way.

Other implications include the application of the “living together” tests, the size criteria and whether we need any statistical information.

We understand that, nationally, numbers affected are likely to be small, but in due course you will need to consider any changes you want to make to your software, forms and leaflets.

Finally, there are consequential amendments needed for the HB/CTB regulations. These are likely to be contained in an Order which will cover all benefits, including HB/CTB.

We will be having detailed discussion with your associations on these issues during July. We will keep you informed of progress.

**HB/CTB Take-up**

We are setting up a project that will enable The Pension Service to play a greater role in HB/CTB take up. It will follow the scans issued to you in February 2005, identifying those who have claimed Pension Credit, but are not claiming HB/CTB. It will involve The Pension Service

- phoning current Pension Credit recipients who do not receive HB/CTB but have an underlying entitlement
- completing HB/CTB claim forms for new Pension Credit customers

Both will involve replacing the current 26 page HB/CTB claim form with a new, three page claim form, which The Pension Service will fill in for the pensioner before it comes to you. The claim process will also involve using income and savings information already captured in the Pension Credit application.

The first phase will run from September 2005 to March 2006, with a prototype from July 2005 and will be based at Nottingham Pension Centre. This will involve The Pension Service making phone calls to current Pension Credit recipients who have not claimed HB/CTB to complete the new HB/CTB claim form over the phone.

Phase 2 of the project commencing December 2005 will involve The Pension Service front line process, delivered through the Pension Credit Application Line. When appropriate The Pension Service will complete an HB/CTB claim form, based on information supplied over the phone by the customer, at the time of the Pension Credit application.

We will be issuing a circular very shortly with all the details – look out for it.

**IRRV Benefit Fraud Symposium**

John Viggers will be available on the HBMS Exhibition stand at the IRRV Benefit Fraud Symposium on the 7 July 2005, to answer any questions about HB fraud and error related issues.

**Replacing RATs- Update**

The RAT pilots will be starting in August and we have now contacted the pilot offices inviting them to take part.

The national roll-out is planned to begin around December. We are keen to involve as many of you as possible, as early in the implementation process as possible. If any of you are interested in being included in the early phases of roll-out please let us know and we will send out a request for further information.

You can now access the standard enquiry facility (SEF) demo via our website.

This shows the new screens that will be available on the DWP Customer Information System (CIS). The demo screen is not the exact screen that is being developed for you, as this will contain additional information you need such as capital details, but in essence the new LA screen will look just like the demo.

Information on access to CIS is available under FAQs on: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/rat/rat_rep_project.asp

For further information on the project contact: ann.chamberlain@dwp.gsi.gov.uk