I do hope those of you who attended this year’s national IRRV conference in Manchester enjoyed the week’s events. And many congratulations to London Borough of Harrow for winning the acclaimed benefits team of the year award, and to Blackpool for winning the fraud team of the year. Perhaps we can expect some articles for Housing Benefit Direct from both authorities about their achievements? For the first time in a long while I didn’t manage to get there myself this time, though quite a few of my staff did go along, and of course our Minister, James Plaskitt, spoke at the conference on Thursday. He concentrated on the new streamlined application process we have developed with The Pension Service to encourage customers to claim Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit. He announced that this facility would be extended, in December, to pensioners applying for Pension Credit for the first time. See article inside – it does look as if this major development in joint-working is already proving successful.

The main reason why I didn’t make it to Manchester is that we are working very hard on preparations for introducing our Housing Benefit Bill. We still can’t say for certain when this will be, but we are working on the assumption that it will be very soon now. The main measures are expected to be: facilitating the roll-out of the Local Housing Allowance (for private sector tenants) nationally, and providing a power for piloting in the social sector. We also hope the Bill will bring further improvements for those entitled to extended payments, allow for more information-sharing between DWP and local authorities, and provide for joint working on fraud investigation and prosecution following the Howell opinion. Preparing for a Bill to introduce into Parliament and supporting Ministers as the Bill progresses will take up a considerable amount of our time here over the coming months, so please bear with us. Obviously, I hope to say more next time, and we will be keeping you posted on developments as they happen.

All this additional activity also means that I am having to curtail (temporarily I should add) our programme of visits to some of you. But last month I did visit some of my own staff who are based in Lytham St Annes. Many of you will be familiar with the Local Authority Support Team who provide your RAT operators with a variety of services. I’m delighted to say that following further re-organisation, the team is now part of my Division. This move is perhaps overdue but it certainly makes sense now, as we develop the new web-based access to DWP data through the Information Flows Project. Given the links between the two, the project manager for the new system will have overall responsibility for the support team (whose role will of course change as we migrate to the new link).

As ever, these are exciting and busy times in Housing Benefit!

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

You will remember that the March edition of Housing Benefit Direct included a Local Housing Allowance supplement. As LHA is the cornerstone of the Government’s HB Reform Programme, it is our intention to include another LHA supplement with the December edition, updating you with progress so far. Please look out for it.

In the meantime, if you have any LHA queries please direct them to the following email address

Email: LHAAdviceline@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

or alternatively visit our website

http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/lha/index.asp
**CTB Take-up: a step further**

Many of you will know that, since September this year, The Pension Service has been making an important contribution to CTB Take-up among people who receive Pension Credit. It involves telephoning existing Pension Credit customers and inviting them to claim CTB (and HB if appropriate). Calls last around five minutes and the information obtained is used to fill in a three-page claim form, which is then sent to the customer to check, sign and send in to the LA.

On 19 October, at the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation’s annual conference in Manchester, James Plaskitt announced that a new phase of the campaign will start in December. This is designed to build constructively on what is already happening. From December, The Pension Service will operate the same short claim process with customers newly claiming Pension Credit.

This new simplified process will mean that customers claiming Pension Credit only have to provide information once – the income and savings information supplied for the Pension Credit application will be used for the CTB (and HB, if appropriate) claim.

The evidence from the work already done with existing pensioners shows that this approach is helpful, customer friendly and successful.

Over the coming winter months we will again, with your support, be running publicity and marketing take-up campaigns aimed at getting those other pensioners, who are entitled to but not getting CTB, to claim it.

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**Improving efficiency in benefits services – tell us about your successes**

The local government efficiency agenda means that LAs are looking to deliver efficiencies in the services they deliver.

We thought now would be a good time to ask for your success stories to tell on delivering efficiencies in your benefits services. Your achievements may well be of interest to other authorities, and we may be able to help spread the news.

So, if you have delivered, or are working to deliver, significant efficiencies in your benefits service we would like to hear from you. We would like to know what you have done (or are doing) and how you have measured (or are measuring) the results. It doesn’t matter if the efficiency is about saving administration costs, improving service quality or both; all are important. Amongst other things, you may have re-engineered your service, entered into partnership working with other authorities or private companies, or implemented IT solutions. The crucial thing is that the changes have delivered/will deliver efficiencies.

Angela Mulligan will be pleased to hear from you. Please contact her by

**Tel:** 020 7712 2159

**Email:** angela.mulligan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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**Content and distribution of HB Direct newsletter**

The purpose of HB Direct is to tell you about future developments within HB/CTB, and we would welcome your views on the format and content of the newsletter.

You may also have comments or suggestions for future editions – or you may even have a question you want to ask us!!!

Please send your ideas or questions to Wendy Fisher by

**Email:** Wendy.Fisher@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Hertfordshire NVQ Project

A successful bid to the Department for Work and Pensions has meant that benefits assessors in Hertfordshire can expand their knowledge and ultimately provide a better service to the people of the county.

The bid for Performance Standard funding, which was put forward by Hertfordshire Training Consortium in May 2005, secured the county £144,700. This will train benefit assessors further in their field and help them to gain the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation professional qualification that will support them in their job.

The consortium includes all ten Hertfordshire district councils, in partnership with Chris Stewart and Associates who launched the training at the beginning of October.

Candidates will initially register with the IRRV and places will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

Senior managers and team leaders within the LAs will work with the trainees to develop their confidence and knowledge in benefits.

The Consortium will need to report regularly to the Department for Work and Pensions on the success of the training and to ensure ongoing support for the project.

For further information, please contact Graham Cox
Tel: 01442 255483

Secondment opportunities

We are setting up a new project to look at how we could deliver help with Council Tax liability for people on low incomes as automatically as possible. In developing options for how this could be achieved there will be a ‘clean sheet of paper’ approach with nothing being ruled out.

We are looking for three secondees from LAs to join the project team. You would be seconded full-time to DWP for three months starting from February 2006. During this time you will spend two days at the Glasgow Solution Centre per week over a period of eight weeks, beginning in February 2006. For the remaining time you will be either based at DWP or working on the project at your base office.

This is an exciting opportunity to be part of the team and help to develop options.

We are looking for people with the following experience and skills

- a sound knowledge and experience of CTB and preferably one person with both benefits and revenues experience
- the ability to think creatively
- can interact with other people
- are receptive to new ideas

If you want to take advantage of this unusual and challenging opportunity, contact Jane Mapp no later than 18 November 2005.

Email: Jane.Mapp@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

This advertisement has been discussed and agreed with the Local Authority Associations.
The National Performance Management Framework (NPMF) Pilot project is a new and exciting venture designed to improve Housing and Council Tax Benefit administration.

The NPMF is a balanced scorecard of measures developed for local authorities around the structure of the DWP Performance Standards. Its purpose is to reduce the burden on staff engaged in collecting data on measures which do not drive performance, achieve consistent reporting on performance measures and allow for greater self-service reporting.

The NPMF has been piloted by a consortium of 10 Scottish local authorities with East Lothian Council taking the lead role. The LAs have developed the NPMF in partnership with Aspiren, and were funded through the DWP Performance Standards Fund.

The software provides:
- Process views
- Scorecards
- Measure update facilities
- Dashboards including the ability to capture commentary reports
- Benchmarking, geographical league tables, on-line discussion forums and knowledge sharing tools
- Data quality tool
- Management of improvement initiatives

Colin Shand, Head of Revenues and IT East Lothian says “The national performance management framework has dramatically improved the level and visibility of the performance information we now have available throughout the service. The hosted benchmarking facility has allowed us to share best practice with all other participating authorities in real time”.

East Lothian Benefits Manager, John Cunningham, describes how the electronic submissions tool will significantly reduce the amount of resources required for stats reporting. “The tool captures data directly from the benefit systems, contains all the DWP validation rules, allows us to data cleanse, generates a complete audit trail and allows for electronic reporting direct to DWP.”

In view of these obvious benefits, DWP is funding free roll-out of the NPMF to all LAs. Roll-out will begin next April and will be completed by April 2007. Aspiren will be contacting all LAs with further details of the product in November.

if you would like more information, please contact Evan King at Aspiren by email

Email: Evan.King@aspiren.com

In the first Commons debate on combating benefit fraud for some years, James Plaskitt, Minister for Housing Benefit, used his opening speech to thank LA staff for “their dedication and commitment to reducing benefit fraud”.

Announcing new measures to tackle benefit fraud he recognised the considerable challenge that LAs face in reducing fraud and error, and stated how pleased he was “with their successes to date”.

During the debate he also launched a major drive against fraud with the publication of ‘Reducing fraud in the Benefit System: Achievements and Ambitions’. This document details the achievements of DWP and LAs in the fight against fraud so far, and future plans to maximise the use of technology and data-matching to reduce fraud further. A copy of this report, which has been sent to all HB managers, can be found at