As we enter 2006, it is perhaps a good time to take stock and look back at what we have achieved, or I should say what you have achieved, over the year. The BVPIs continue to tell a very good story, average processing times now down to 36 days, and although there are problems still to be addressed in some areas, this picture of steady, and in some cases spectacular, improvement is backed by evidence from Ombudsman reports and our own correspondence. We now have a very firm foundation on which to build.

Some of the year’s highlights have included the progress made through Performance Standards funding, including some very innovative and exciting national products, eg the National Performance Management Framework and Euclidian Benefits to name but two, see inside. The IT Flows Project, replacing RATs is now being piloted, and our work with The Pension Service to streamline the claims process for people getting Pension Credit has been very successful. I know there have been several sets of regulation changes for you to digest, but hopefully some of the changes have been helpful in clarifying and resolving past issues. And we are just about to consolidate the regulations, more of this next month. So I think we have a lot to be proud about.

There is of course a lot more to do, and I know there will be challenges ahead. We will do more to build our relations with Jobcentre Plus to ensure joint working becomes more consistent. And continue to work with Jobcentre Plus to resolve outstanding issues around CMS. And the reform programme, including the Local Housing Allowance, will be developed, if not quite at the pace we originally intended. But this now provides a good opportunity for further consultation and comment. During the course of the year, we will address the Howell opinion, introduce further subsidy reform, and rollout the IT Flows Project. So we have plenty on the reform agenda and, working together, I think we will see more significant progress, and even better outcomes for the public, in the year ahead.

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

Interventions are a success

LAs have been making a real success of the interventions regime introduced in April 2004
• 17% of risk based reviews detect an overpayment
• 8% detect an underpayment
• the ‘hit rate’ for data-matches is currently running at 41%

We also know now that
• 37% of cases in risk group 3 are standard pensioners
• 23% of reviews are on cases in risk groups 5 and 6 despite the much lower ‘hit-rate’ these achieve
• in principle, most LAs have sufficient cases in risk groups 1-3 to meet their 50% reviews target
• if the cases with highest risk were reviewed first then the overall detection rate would be above 21%
• increasing the frequency of reviews in risk groups 1-3 would make further reductions in fraud and error

Although there have been problems
• there is a wide variation in the detection rates declared
• some LAs are not submitting reviews data on the HBSD/IAD scan
• some LAs seem to be submitting HBMS result sheets showing data-matches as resolved before taking corrective action

These issues will be discussed at a workshop in February with LAA representatives and LA practitioners.

If you would like this group to discuss any specific concerns, please send us an email:
Fraud-Error-Policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
by the end of January.
Council Tax Benefit take-up – a summary

The Pension Service ran scans in January 2005 to identify people who were getting Pension Credit but not claiming CTB. They identified some 340,000 cases where Pension Credit was in payment with no evidence of CTB or HB payment. Of these, around 220,000 pensioners were getting the Pension Credit guarantee credit but not CTB. This information was passed to LAs to begin contacting people.

Building on this, The Pension Service began a more robust role. This addresses two distinct groups

- phase 1 - existing Pension Credit customers not getting CTB or HB
- phase 2 - people newly claiming Pension Credit

Phase 1 runs from September 2005 to March 2006. This involves staff at Nottingham Pension Centre telephoning existing Pension Credit customers nationwide 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 new three page CTB/HB claim form. This completed form is then sent to the customer to check, sign and send to the LA in a pre-paid envelope.

Phase 2 started on 5 December 2005. It involves front line staff using the same short CTB/HB claim process, but this time with people newly claiming Pension Credit.

The new simplified process means that Pension Credit customers only have to provide information once, the income and savings information supplied for the Pension Credit application is used for the CTB/HB claims.

Our longer term aim is to make support for Council Tax liability as automatic as possible for everyone, not just pensioners.

A new team, comprising representatives from LAs, Housing Costs Business Stream (Adelphi), Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will be looking at this early in 2006. The plan is for their work to form the basis of options for Ministers to consider. We have already recruited three LA secondees to help us in this important task.

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

Performance Standards Fund

Awards from the Performance Standards Fund now amount to £170m. This includes funds which have been ring-fenced for the roll-out of the National Performance Management Framework to all LA and a more limited roll-out of South Gloucestershire’s Automated Form Processing software. Look out for HB/CTB General Bulletin January 2006 which will contain more detail on these two products. There will also be a circular coming out in early January which will set out our strategy for the allocation of the remainder of the Fund.

Contact email: Clare.Mitton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

HB/CTB Performance Standards

First of all, thank you to all the LAs who submitted their self-assessments against the Performance Standards this autumn. Along with the assessments done for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment for English single tiers we now have virtually a full set. We know that some of you were unable to meet the deadline for various reasons but we look forward to receiving your self-assessments by the dates we agreed with you.

You will know that we are discussing changes to the Performance Standards scoring methodology with your representatives. In particular, we need to make sure the Security theme can be scored so that it supports the new arrangements for the payment of counter fraud funding, see HB/CTB Circular S4/2005. It is important that the Standards provide LAs with the incentive to continue to become even more effective in minimising fraud and error. We will consult more widely on the proposed changes after they have been discussed in detail with the Fraud Operations Group in mid-January.

Contact email: Clare.Mitton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Complaints falling

We can all look back over the last three or four years with satisfaction at the improvements that have been brought about in HB/CTB administration. The Performance Indicators for claims processing have shown a marked improvement in this time.

An alternative way you can gauge whether improvements are taking place is to look at the number of complaints you receive about your Benefits Service. We have heard from a number of you that the amount you are getting is falling steadily.

One of the most independent measures is the number of complaints received by the Local Government Ombudsmen. For example, did you know that since the 2000/01 year, and up to the end of the 2004/05, complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman for England about HB maladministration have fallen by 64%, ie from 4,028 to 1,467!

And, a fall in letters of complaint specifically about HB delays and maladministration to DWP Ministers has a very similar look, again a fall of 64%.

So, congratulations to all for what has been achieved. We are sure further efforts to reduce the complaints postbag in the coming year will be much appreciated by your Members and our Ministers!

Contact
Email: John.Oliver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

RATs replacement

Our pilot offices are now online and working well and we are still on plan for the national roll-out to start in the spring. For the most up-to-date news on what is happening and when, have a look at our website:
http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/rat/

For further information contact email: ann.chamberlain@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Mission Impossible?

In early December, 25 brave souls from The Pension Service, policy divisions, BFI and, more importantly, LAs chose to accept the mission to consider the issue about the differing approaches to verification taken by The Pension Service and LAs.

Following presentations from DWP and a very impressive one from Mel Scott of the London Borough of Southwark, we split into syndicates that focussed on what the differences actually are. The conclusion was definitely capital, maybe earnings and the remainder was either the difference between Pension Credit and HB legislation or different ways in which various LAs interpret the Verification Framework.

The second syndicate looked at the respective interventions regimes and explored the possibilities for bringing these closer together, especially when Joint Teams already exist.

Discussions were very positive, with everyone showing great enthusiasm for taking this work forward. The next step will be a paper to the January meeting of the Practitioners Operational Group. By then we expect to have reviewed the VF guidance to see if we can offer some clarification, though we are committed to the principle of discretion when appropriate. We are also very optimistic that we can trial ‘joint interventions’ in some form or another. However, some of the issues around capital and the issue of originals versus photocopies will probably require further work before we can come to a conclusion.

Everyone agreed that this was a very successful way of working together to address the problem, with contributions from the frontline LA staff being particularly valuable. Words used to describe the two days included

• eye-opening
• win, win, win
• genuine desire to move forward

If this article has set you thinking and you would like your concerns included, please email: Fraud-Error-Policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Euclidian Benefits secures extra DWP funding

*HB Direct October 2005* contained an article covering Euclidian Benefits Basics, the web-based interactive learning tool, designed as a standard national on-line induction programme into Benefits.

Developed by Mid-Sussex District Council and The Institute of Revenues, Rating & Valuation (IRRV), with funding from DWP, the programme has been rolled out to LAs during 2005. A process that has achieved measurable success, with well over 90% of all LAs in England, Scotland & Wales registering to take advantage of the free, unlimited availability of the package.

The DWP has now agreed to fund the basic product for a further 12 months. This means that free use of Euclidian Benefits Basics for LAs will continue until 31 March 2007.

If you are an existing user, do nothing. Your Access Key Code will be refreshed with a further 12 months accessibility. If you are not currently registered as a user, and want to take advantage of this training opportunity, email the Euclidian team at IRRV Headquarters, contact details below.

Meanwhile, development work has continued on a number of variations to the basic product, as well as the more advanced version, Euclidian Benefits Pro.

Euclidian Benefits Pro is designed to take new basic-trained, but inexperienced, staff and expand their knowledge base over a longer period, turning them into fully-fledged benefit assessors. It is now at an advanced stage of its development and will be formally launched at the IRRV’s Benefits Conference, in Harrogate, in February.

Euclidian Benefits for Housing Associations was launched in the Autumn, following exposure at the Housing Federation Conference in Birmingham. This product is designed to provide Housing Association staff with a sound grounding in basic HB/CTB knowledge. If your housing department or, any of your local Housing Associations would find this useful, please contact the IRRV on the email address below.

Euclidian Benefits for the Voluntary Sector is rapidly taking shape, with assistance provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau, and should be available early in the new year. Euclidian Benefits for Elected Members will swiftly follow.

If you wish to see any of the Euclidian products being demonstrated, then why not come along to the IRRV Benefits Conference in Harrogate, from 7 to 9 February 2006.

For further information about Euclidian Benefits products, contact the Euclidian Team

Tel: ☎ 020 7691 8984
Email: euclidianbenefits@irrv.org.uk

Whilst we are happy to include this advert in HB Direct, we are unable to endorse this product.

Customer Management System future releases

The introduction of CMS Release 3 on 31 October 2005 removed the LA Questionnaire and CMS 1 (LA) from the CMS process. It also saw the incorporation of the previously photocopied EBC pages into the LA Input Document. All questions, answers and calculations previously captured on these forms are now included as part of the LA Input Document.

There are two further major CMS releases planned for 2006. Release 4 in Spring 2006 will include legislative changes introduced since Release 3 was signed off, for example, capturing claims from same sex couples, ie civil partnerships. Release 5 due in Autumn 2006 will contain any legislative changes made post Release 4 and some business improvements.

Following the introduction of Release 3 we have received a few questions from LAs regarding the lack of a customer’s signature following the removal of the LA Questionnaire. Some of you are concerned that you will be assessing and paying HB/CTB claims without a customer’s signature. This is not the case. The customer’s signature is on the Customer Statement retained by Jobcentre Plus and LAs should process the HB/CTB claim using the information from the LA Input Document.

There will be more detailed information regarding the customer’s signature and civil partnerships in the *HB/CTB General Bulletin January 2006*.

For further information on CMS either visit our website: [www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefits/cms](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefits/cms) contact Kerry Hartley at email: ✉ Kerry.Hartley1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk