I appreciate just how busy you will have been recently, with the annual billing exercise, uprating, and the local government elections. So I do hope you managed to have a decent Easter and bank holiday break.

I am very pleased to say that we have now got the green light to proceed with national implementation of the IT Information Flows project. Towards the end of April we had to go through what in project-speak is known as an operational readiness review. This means satisfying all stakeholders and others with an interest in the project that we have done enough testing, and satisfied all the security, financial and business requirements to allow us to move from the piloting to the roll-out stage. Everyone who has been involved in testing the new link has said how much better it is so it should make a real difference. Can I make a plea though? Please read carefully all the advice that comes out about how to prepare for the new link (for example see Information flow for LAs - replacing the RAT inside). We have a very tight schedule to roll-out by the end of October this year. We want it to work for you but we will need your help!

We announced more good news in HB/CTB Bulletin U9/2006. We are making such good progress in the work to gather the management information we need direct from your systems (the 100% data scan) that we no longer require Stats 116 and 123 returns (the 1% sample). All this stuff can get a bit technical for me but the important point is something I’ve been committed to for a long time – reducing unnecessary clerical work by you. We have made a start but it is only a start. In time we hope to be able to remove the need for you to submit other stats returns as well.

Finally, many thanks to those of you who responded to the Welfare Reform Green Paper consultation. As expected quite a number of responses came in just before the deadline so we are still looking at them. Several seem to support the gist of what we are proposing, though inevitably many different views were expressed. We will get more information to you as soon as we can – see below for a brief timetable.

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

Welfare Reform Green Paper

As many of you know, the publication of the Green Paper, A New Deal for Welfare: Empowering People to Work, launched the start of a 12 week consultation period – which ended on 21 April 2006.

We’ve been delighted with the level of responses to the green paper as a whole, and particularly pleased with the considered responses to the issues raised in Chapter 6: A radical new approach to Housing Benefit.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who took the time to share your thoughts and experiences on this issue. We’re currently reading through all of the consultation responses carefully and we’re particularly interested to read respondents’ suggestions about how to improve HB for tenants in the social sector.

The full Government response will be published in the summer, and will be available at www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/welfarereform

Look out for a further update in next month’s HB Direct.

John.cummins@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Preparations for the national roll-out of the RAT replacement are well underway. The first tranche of LAs is on target for a 'live' start date of mid-May. Awareness workshops for LAs are now being held and cover all aspects of implementation and training, as well as the security and set-up of staff within the LA. You are strongly advised to ensure that a representative from your LA attends when your invitation arrives.

The pilot offices continue to collect information via the new Customer Information System (CIS), the system link is robust and is performing well for them. They are currently testing the delivery of ETD via the new link.

All LAs have been allocated CIS access for the number of staff they requested, see HB/CTB Bulletin U11/2005, Appendix 1. Any increases to that number will be considered once the national rollout is complete.

Please remember to let the project team know urgently if your authority changes its Internet Protocol (IP) address. If you don’t then it could affect your ability to access the new system.

If you have any queries contact Mary.Carns@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or check our website http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/rat/

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**Are you missing out on Learning and Development opportunities?**

*HB/CTB Circular F1/2006* announced that Housing Benefit Strategy Division has taken over responsibility from Jobcentre Plus for counter-fraud training for LAs, and asked you to nominate all investigators and managers who required PINS training.

A number of you have not yet responded to that circular. To help Learning and Development (L&D) plan their training schedule please apply by **19 May 2006 at the latest**.

If you need any PINS Foundation Training, please contact Maxine Dunne on tel: 0208 268 4240.

If you have already nominated delegates you do not need to re-submit your nomination.

In addition, DWP local authority L&D Consultants will be in touch with you soon to discuss any other learning and development needs you may have in order to administer HB accurately and securely. If you would like to contact them in advance of their call, the contact points are as follows:

- **East** Brian Harvey  07876478855
- **London** Craig Smith  07884117672
- **Midlands** Julie Dyer  07760 173156
- **North East** Andy Sinclair  07876478858
- **North Wales** Russ Morris  07884117675
- **North West** Frances Bullen  07810832566
- **Scotland** Allan Wernham  07769935950
- **South East** Mark Cooper  07884117661
- **South Wales** Mike Gore  07876478851, John Baker  07810832565
- **South West** Ian Barker  07775858704

Where on the web? - www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit...
Fraud and Error Policy Team - secondee opportunity

The Fraud and Error Policy Team is responsible for the development and application of the Departmental strategy to prevent fraud and error from entering the HB system, and to ensure that those who commit fraud are caught and punished.

We are looking for someone from an LA to join the team, on a full time basis, for six months starting as soon as possible. During this time you will be seconded to the DWP and based at the Adelphi in Central London.

The work is interesting and varied. Key activities will include

- examining how improvements to business processes within LAs can help reduce fraud and error. In particular, to specify the core requirements for a comprehensive error awareness package for LAs
- assisting in the development of the strategy to reduce fraud and error within HB and CTB, and
- managing relationships between the team and LA intelligence service providers

This is an ideal opportunity to be part of a team developing the Department’s strategy to reduce loss within HB. In particular, the successful applicant will have the opportunity to make a real difference to the way that LAs tackle error. The job would particularly suit an individual who is able to think strategically, has strong communication skills and an appreciation of how business improvements can contribute to the reduction of fraud and error.

If you want to take advantage of this opportunity, contact Adrian Pateman no later than Friday 19 May 2006.

Email: adrian.pateman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

The Working Future project

Working Future is an innovative project that is helping people in temporary accommodation into employment. It does this by tackling the ‘benefit trap’ and providing participants with increased training opportunities and access to employment advice. The project is running in the east London boroughs of Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest and is led by the Mayor of London and the East Thames Housing Group. We, together with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, fully support the aims of this project.

Rent for temporary accommodation leased from the private sector to house homeless people is charged at market rates, and due to the high management costs that this type of property attracts, is therefore significantly more expensive than council rents. This can be perceived as a disincentive for homeless households in this type of accommodation to enter employment. As part of this project, the participating households pay an affordable rent, the cost of which is met by HB. The remaining rent is funded separately, through a direct central government grant.

The project started in September 2005, and is expected to last two years. To date, 155 people have signed up to the project (including a control group of 51 who benefit from increased access to employment opportunities but do not receive a rent subsidy). Although there were some initial challenges in signing tenants up to the project, Working Future is already beginning to deliver successes. So far, nine Working Future participants have been helped into employment, five of whom are in full-time, permanent positions. A further seven have secured voluntary work placements and 67 have enrolled on training courses. The project has also been recognised for its partnership working at the National Housing Federation’s InBiz Awards, winning the Partner of Choice category.

Evaluation of the project is taking place on a continuous basis, and a final report will be released in the latter part of 2007, after the project is complete. Further information about the Working Future project, including its first six-month evaluation, can be found at the following web address: http://www.workingfuture.org.uk
Could you cope with a disaster?

Many of you may have seen Lesley Pigott’s article in BFI’s spring edition of the Standard in which she described how Camden coped with the loss of Northgate’s data centre in the Buncefield oil depot fire. Fortunately, Camden had a disaster recovery plan in place which enabled them to cope with the disruption but what if it had been your authority that was affected – could you have continued to provide a service?

Looking at the Performance Standards self-assessments submitted last year over a third of LAs did not satisfy enabler E52 in the Resource management theme. The enabler asks if the local authority has documented arrangements to manage risks to the service provision to ensure business continuity during change programmes and emergencies.

Given the times we live in – Buncefield, bombs in London, talk of flu pandemics – all organisations should be making sure they have business continuity plans in place and that they review them regularly. We also thought that we could help by using an article in more direct to highlight the experiences of other LAs who have had to cope with disasters and share good practice. So, if you have a story to tell, do get in touch with Clare Mitton.

Email: clare.mitton@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Compliance with the Verification Framework 2005/2006

HB/CTB Bulletin G2/2006 contained a reminder that the Verification Framework (VF) end of year compliance certificate for 2005/2006 was due to be returned by 30 April 2006. This is the last year in which a compliance certificate is required.

LA performance in 2006/2007 will be monitored through the Performance Measures. The certificate asks you to confirm that VF standards have been applied to each module with which you are compliant, and that targets for interventions and data-matches have been achieved. It also seeks confirmation of the number of reviews and visits initiated during the year. The certificate indicates that aspects of your performance will be reviewed and assessed using data you have provided to HBMS and the Information Centre. These aspects are Data Incidents, NINO accuracy, loadable data to HBMS and the return of the HBSD/IAD scan to the Information Centre.

The certificate is available on the website at www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/docs2006/acc-0306.pdf. If any LA does not have access to the internet please email SAFE-VF@dwp.gsi.gov.uk to request a certificate.

The completed end of year compliance certificate should be returned to
SAFE-VF Team
Local Authority Performance Division
5th Floor, The Adelphi
1 – 11 John Adam Street
London WC2N 6HT.

Should you need to make any further enquiries please contact the VF team on SAFE-VF@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Your views, comments and suggestions for HB Direct

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

You may 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 Kath Murphy at

Email: Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

How can I get HB Direct sent to me?

If you would like to receive HB Direct by email, usually on the 1st of each month (or nearest working day), then please send your name and the name of your LA or organisation, to orderline@cds.co.uk.

They will add you to their e-mailing list. You will need Adobe Acrobat to enable you to open the pdf file. This can be downloaded free of charge from the website http://www.adobe.co.uk/products/acrobat/readstep2.html