I am writing this piece the day after the Welfare Reform Bill Second Reading debate in the House of Commons. This took place on Monday 24 July, just before the House broke up for the summer recess. I am delighted that we are finally well on the way to taking forward the legislation that will facilitate roll-out of the Local Housing Allowance, for private sector tenants, to all authorities. The legislation also includes provisions to reform extended payments, extend information sharing and redress the position created by the Howell opinion (so that you will be able to investigate and prosecute fraud on DWP benefits when linked to Housing Benefit). We have been promising to do some of these things for quite a while so it’s really good that we’re getting there at last. We will have a busy time in October when the Bill will be considered by a Commons Committee, but I’m sure all will go well. Although there was a lot of healthy debate in the House during Second Reading, there did seem to be a fair degree of consensus about the principles. So that is a good sign.

It was very good to see some of you at the Wales IRRV Conference on 20 July, though I must say Llandrindod Wells is not the easiest of places to get to! I gave a talk on the challenges facing Housing Benefit, including supporting the welfare to work agenda, contributing to poverty targets, and promoting efficiency while improving service to the customer (perhaps the biggest challenge of all – and for the public sector as a whole). I wasn’t asked too many difficult questions on the day, but we did have quite a lengthy discussion in the bar the night before when I was told, in a very friendly way I hasten to add, about current concerns, from the operation of CMS to the changes of circumstance BVPI. But of course this is why we welcome speaking at conferences like this – it does give us the opportunity to find out what the real issues are.

Finally if you, like me, are just about to go off on leave I do hope you have a good break.

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

Incapacity benefits reform

You are probably aware of the Government’s plans to replace incapacity benefits with Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) from 2008. As the Welfare Reform Bill which contains the proposals for the reform was introduced to Parliament on 4 July, we thought now would be the right time to let you know our intended policy for the treatment of ESA in the calculation of HB/CTB. This will require amending regulations in due course and we will first consult your associations in the normal way.

The proposals are, as is the case for Jobseeker’s Allowance, that ESA will be either contributory or income-related. This means that if the person is receiving only the contributory element they must make a standard HB/CTB claim and the ESA will be taken fully into account but, if the person is receiving the income-related element, they will receive full eligible HB/CTB.

This basic policy will mostly be achieved by amending the HB/CTB regulations and work on this will be starting shortly. At the moment the priority is the work on the Welfare Reform Bill. Once the Bill is passed by Parliament we will have the powers to make the necessary amendments to the HB/CTB regulations.

Apart from amending regulations we will of course need to agree and set up the necessary operational procedures arising from the policy, for example achieving the necessary interchange of information between LAs and DWP.

We will of course keep you informed via HB Direct, HB/CTB General Bulletins and HB/CTB Circulars. But should you require any further information at this time please contact Christine.Watkins@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
It is clear that people are sick of the disruption caused by anti-social people in their neighbourhoods. The Government has done much to tackle this but we are keen to try out new tools. In January 2006, the Government published its Respect Action Plan setting out a cross-government strategy to tackle bad behaviour and nurture a culture of respect.

As part of the Respect Agenda, the Government intends to pilot a new measure that will sanction HB when a person has been evicted for anti-social behaviour and then refuses to undertake steps to address their behaviour through rehabilitation.

In most cases we expect that we will not need to use the sanction, but the threat will be a powerful tool to ensure that ‘neighbours from hell’ engage with rehabilitation. The sanction will only operate when the household has chosen not to co-operate.

This will send a clear signal to the handful of people evicted each year for anti-social behaviour that they must address their problem behaviour. These difficult households must realise they are at the end of the line and the right to HB carries a responsibility to be a decent neighbour.

DWP is currently legislating for this proposal as part of the Welfare Reform Bill that received its second reading on 24 July. We plan to pilot it in parallel with some of the pathfinder areas for the Family Intervention Projects currently being developed by the Respect Task Force. We intend to pilot for two years as soon as legislation is in place in around 10 LAs in England. We would evaluate the pilots thoroughly before taking a decision about whether to roll-out this scheme nationally.

Clearly we need to work with LAs and other stakeholders on the detail of how to develop the pilots, including identifying suitable authorities. If you would like more detailed information on the proposal, or if you would like to be considered for piloting, please contact Daniel Gieve at Email: Daniel.gieve@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

You may be aware that the HB/CTB Take-up Project is closing on 12 September 2006.

**What we’ve done**

With your help and support we have successfully achieved our objectives – to increase HB/CTB take-up by existing Pension Credit customers and to introduce a new 3-page HB/CTB claim form.

**How we’ve done it**

Together we have worked in partnership to make a real difference to pensioners in terms of customer service and take-up of HB/CTB. Since 5 December 2005, customers have been able to claim HB/CTB by telephone at the same time as making their Pension Credit application. And, since July 2006, customers have also been able to claim their State Retirement Pension at the same time as HB/CTB and Pension Credit.

Joint LA and DWP teams have also worked together to offer home visits to customers who could not be contacted by telephone or who experienced communication difficulties.

Latest figures show that we are now paying out £650,000 weekly in additional HB/CTB.

Since December 2005, the increase in successful HB/CTB applicants using the new joint Pension Credit and HB/CTB application process, equates to an annual increase of £16m!

**What happens next ...**

All on-going responsibilities will be handed over to Jim Boyd and Fiona McLeish, The Pension Service HB/CTB Liaison Team. Contact details are

James Boyd: Email: James.Boyd@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk Tel: 0141 245 6945
Fiona McLeish: Email: Fiona.McLeish1@thepensionservice.gsi.gov.uk Tel: 0141 245 6946
**Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) Open Days**

Following the success of the HBMS Open Days over the last two years, we will be doing it all again this November!

An agenda is being prepared for two consecutive one-day events (identical agenda) which will take place on 22 and 23 November 2006. We are planning to respond to your requirements and will finalise the agenda following a pre-event questionnaire that will be issued to all prospective attendees. So, if you are struggling to distinguish your CTIC201s from your CTIC101s, would like to get an update on current and future initiatives, share best practices with other LAs or simply discuss individual issues, please book your place!

The one-day events will take place in Lytham St Annes, Lancashire and places will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. A limit of two places per LA may be required where numbers dictate.

In the past these events have been well attended and we've received very positive feedback, so please join us in November.

For further information and to register your interest, please contact Julie Bradford at HBMS

Email: julie.bradford1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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**HB/CTB Performance Standards – Self-assessment tool and Performance Measure Guide**

Hopefully by the time you read this your LA will have submitted its self-assessment against the Performance Standards for 2005/06, either as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) or in response to HB/CTB Circular A12/2006. If for any reason you have not been able to meet the end of July deadline for non-CPA authorities and are still planning to submit your self-assessment, please make sure that you have downloaded the current self-assessment tool and Performance Measure Guide from the HBDS website www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds. We will be removing the 2005/06 versions of the tool and guide on 14 September and replacing them with updated versions that reflect the changes we made to the Performance Standards from April 2006 (HB/CTB Circular A7/2006).

You should also have received Amendment 2 to the Performance Standards manual, and a third is following shortly as there were some omissions in the second for which we apologise.

If you have any queries please contact us at Email: Performance-Framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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**Housing Benefit Operational Database**

I have the great pleasure of informing you that the Housing Benefit Operational Database (HoBOD) is available on the DWP website. This is a database that contains Housing and Council Tax Benefit management information (MIS).

HoBOD can be accessed using the following link http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hobod

The data in HoBOD is taken from LAs’ MIS statistics returns to DWP, and represents their reported performance. This allows you to view information about

- 19 Performance Measures
- Reviews data
- HB/CTB Overpayments information

We are keen to work with you to ensure the validity and consistency of the data submitted, so if you find any inaccuracies please let us know on the following email address iad.hobod@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Further details about HoBOD will be in the next HB/CTB General Bulletin.

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**IT Information Flow for Local Authorities (RAT Replacement)**

National roll-out started in May and already just over 200 LAs now have access to the Customer Information System (CIS). We are currently on schedule to meet the October roll-out deadline.

Early feedback is very positive – HB/CTB staff are finding that the system considerably reduces the length of time it takes to collect the DWP information needed to assess claims. Nevertheless, all new systems are not without their problems and some LAs have experienced access difficulties; we had a frustrating couple of days during which our service providers located and then fixed the problem. All now seems to be back to normal!

**Implementation Guidance**

For LAs who have yet to go-live, you will find advice and guidance in a number of HB/CTB General Bulletins issued since December 2005, most recently G7, as well as Frequently Asked Questions on the project website http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/rat/

We strongly suggest that you have a look at this material as it will help you to prepare for the smooth implementation of the new system.

For help and advice, please contact the project via Email: Mary.Carns@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or QH.ITIFLA@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK
CMS Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit reply slips

Jobcentre Plus has undertaken a number of initiatives to improve overall performance. As part of this work it has emerged that returned reply slips (generated by the production of Customer Management System (CMS) LA Input Documents, appearing on the final page) are significantly lower than the number issued. This reply slip is annotated ‘Received and actioned’ – this simply refers to receipt of the LA Input Document at the LA and it is strongly recommended that the slip is returned the day the Input Document is received. There are several reasons for this.

- The reply slip plays a significant role within the CMS process. It is the return of this slip that triggers the deletion of a case from CMS. When each input document has been received by all processing sections (including LAs) the case must be deleted, as CMS is an information gathering system only. Failure to do so is a breach of data protection legislation.
- Each additional case left on CMS results in slower running of the system, so efficient deletion of cases is in the interests of all stakeholders.
- It is recognised that the low rate of reply slip returns may be due to initial non-receipt of the Input Documents. In addition to the existing liaison established between LAs and Jobcentre Plus in support of CMS, dialogue is encouraged to establish if documents issued tally with those received.

If you have any queries relating to the above article, or CMS in general, please contact Colin Heward
Email: colin.heward@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

How can we reduce error in Housing Benefit?

Loss through error in HB is rising, and we are looking for ways to help you reduce it. HB fraud loss has reduced by 38% but unfortunately the same cannot be said for customer error, which has increased by 62%.

We want you, as benefit practitioners, to share your views and experience on the causes of error. For example, do you have a view on how we can help customers report their changes of circumstance quicker; or whether there are procedures that can be adopted to reduce processing errors?

If you do, we would like to offer you the opportunity to attend a workshop in London on the 12 September 2006.

For more information please contact Kehinde Otemade-Paul
Tel: 0207 962 8914
Email: Kehinde.Otemade-Paul@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

If you cannot make the workshop please don’t hesitate to let us know your views via the contact details above.

Performance Standards Fund: Ends March 2007

The Performance Standards Fund has been a great success and has so far helped over 370 LAs to introduce improvements to their HB/CTB administration.

As you may remember, the Fund originally ran for three years but was extended for a fourth year to enable LAs to deliver all their projects by the end March 2007. Many of these projects have now been completed, however there are a great number of them still running.

We are particularly keen to make sure that LAs with large IT projects have completed their procurement/tendering exercises and provided the required gateway reports. If you have completed your IT project then please ensure you submit your final report to secure release of the balance of your funding.

It is vital that all projects are completed and final progress reports received by their due dates, otherwise you could lose all or some of the funding awarded to you. Over the coming weeks you may be contacted to be reminded of the importance that your project is completed by March 2007.

For Performance Standards Fund queries, please contact us by
Email: housing-support-standards@DWP.gsi.gov.uk
Tel: 0207 962 8080 / 0207 712 2455