I appreciate that we are now coming up to what is traditionally the busiest time for local authorities, as you prepare for the annual billing exercise. Most of you will, I’m sure, be very busy over the next month or so. But before you get really rushed off your feet, I hope some of you will enjoy a good break at the IRRV Benefits Conference next week. Some of my team will be there and we will again have a stall in the exhibition area – see short note inside. I will be there for a good part of the first two days and our Minister, James Plaskitt, is speaking on the Wednesday. As ever, we will want to listen to your views and to do our best to answer your questions. I now see it as an opportunity to see old friends as well as meet some new people.

The main focus of our contribution will be how we go about tackling what is a growing problem – customer error in the system. There are a couple of articles in this edition of HB Direct which help set the scene. We will be outlining a series of measures to address the problem, which we have discussed with Ministers and with your associations. Many of these are based on ideas you have already given us at the recent security road-shows. But I believe it is particularly important to listen to you, the practitioners, because you will have the best feel for what is really going on. So I’m very keen that we have a debate and that you tell us what your views are on what we should all be doing. We will be launching a strategy to deal with fraud and error but it will not be set in stone. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that we have found all the answers!

I am pleased to say that the Welfare Reform Bill is making good progress through Parliament. We had a Second Reading in the House of Lords last week and the debate did include some discussion about the Housing Benefit measures, mostly centred around the single room rate and the proposals for anti-social behaviour sanctions. You can follow the debates of course in Hansard.

I look forward to seeing some of you at Harrogate.

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

Rent Officer review of Broad Rental Market Areas

As the Welfare Reform Bill starts its progression through the House of Lords, attention begins to turn to the preparations needed for the national rollout of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). Of fundamental importance to the success of the LHA will be the Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA), the areas by which the LHA rates will be set.

The Rent Service review their localities/BRMAs on a regular basis but have also commenced a planned fundamental review which will ensure that the BRMAs reflect both the current rental market and the statutory definition of what they should include.

To set the BRMAs, The Rent Service will be using sophisticated mapping and data collecting techniques. They will also be consulting with you. This will provide an invaluable perspective on the local markets.

When The Rent Service comes to your authority, you may wish to involve wider stakeholders within the authority, such as those involved in housing strategy. This is your chance to help The Rent Service ensure that the BRMA boundaries are set in the most appropriate way. This in turn will mean that when the LHA is rolled out, it is fully reflective of the market, and therefore giving your customers the best possible service.

If you have any queries about LHA or BRMAs please send them to Email: LHAadvice line@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Fraud and error update

By the time you get this issue, the Housing Benefit Review will just be publishing their latest findings, based on HB claims sampled between April 2005 and March 2006. These show the national picture of HB overpaid through fraud and error.

You’ll find the latest HB figures on our web-site at www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fraud_error.asp as well as other statistics on Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Pension Credit.

On 7 February, our Minister, James Plaskitt, will launch our Housing Benefit Fraud & Error Strategy at the IRRV Benefits conference in Harrogate. This sets out our strategy for tackling HB overpayment through fraud and error.

The strategy also contains our action plan showing a number of projects which we’ll be undertaking over the next few years. These are aimed at providing you with the tools to tackle fraud and error in a productive and cost-effective way. They’ll also evaluate a number of the ‘good ideas’ which you came up with at the recent Security roadshows, so we can tell you which ones work, and which ones don’t!

How to get your free copy of the Housing Benefit Fraud & Error Strategy
- you can pick up a copy of the full strategy at the IRRV conference on 7 February
- at the same time, the full strategy will be available to download from our website at www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/fraud-error
- a summary of the strategy and a copy of the action plan will be sent to your Chief Executive on 7 February

If you’re planning any initiatives to tackle fraud and error in your own LA – particularly if they’re relevant to any of the projects in our action plan – we’d like to hear about them, successful or otherwise. Please send us details of your initiative, how you evaluated it, and what results you got. Our email address is Fraud-Error-Policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

IRRV Benefits Conference & Exhibition

We will again be part of the exhibition at the forthcoming IRRV Benefits Conference at Harrogate. Our stand number is 4/5 which we will be sharing with The Pension Service HB/CTB Liaison Team.

The stand will be manned by a range of DWP personnel who should be able to answer your queries. This year the HB Fraud and Error Policy Team will be strongly represented.

We will be happy to answer any queries where we can, and pass on any queries and suggestions to DWP officials unable to attend.

If you are attending the conference please do try to come and see us at our stand.

Contact: Mont Goldman, telephone: 020 7962 8360, email: mont.goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Payments to tenants – the future

We want HB to offer a more active form of support – so that it provides a step towards employment and financial inclusion, and to help achieve this we want to increase the numbers of tenants handling their own HB payments.

While implementation of LHA, where payments are generally made to tenants, will extend the principle of tenant responsibility and bank account usage, this will only apply to those in the private rented sector. As many of you will be aware, we have decided not to introduce LHA in the social sector but we are still keen to explore ways in which we can extend the principle of tenant responsibility to this sector too.

We are very aware of the difficulties that the reform of HB in the social sector will present and we are adopting a cautious approach to change. Currently, we are gathering evidence and working with those in the sector to inform a reasonable approach. As our plans in this area are in the very early stages there is still an opportunity for those who may wish to contribute. So, if you would like to work with us and help to develop an approach that takes account of the needs of the whole sector, we would like to hear from you.

For more information contact LHAdviceline@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
I have received a number of enquiries in recent months about how you might arrange for an article to be published in this newsletter and details about the deadlines, the format and length of each item.

**Getting your article published in HB Direct**

I have received a number of enquiries in recent months about how you might arrange for an article to be published in this newsletter and details about the deadlines, the format and length of each item.

**Deadlines**

We publish HB Direct on the first working day of every new month unless that happens to fall at the weekend when we publish on the first working day afterwards. I need to have final drafts of articles at least 5 working days before the publication date; this allows time for any drafting changes and quality assurance. The deadline for the March issue is Wednesday 21 February.

**Format and length**

In order to include as many articles as possible they should be short and written in a chatty style, if necessary acting as a signpost to more detailed information that you could publish on your own local website or include in a later issue of a General Information Bulletin.

**External entries**

We do on a regular basis feature articles that have been written by people who are external to DWP. Whilst we are happy to include them if we have room, we do make clear that we cannot endorse particular products or services not provided by DWP.

Please send your articles to Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or for further information contact me on 020 7962 8540.
National leaflets project update

Further to the article in Issue 60, the National Leaflets Project is nearing completion. There is a subscription form available on the website [www.benefit-leaflets.org](http://www.benefit-leaflets.org). By completing this you will be kept up to date whenever there is a change to any of the leaflets as they are constantly being updated.

When the leaflets are finalised, they will all have a Crystal Mark awarded from the Plain English Campaign. No changes can be made to the leaflets otherwise it invalidates the Crystal Mark.

To reduce the need for printed copies, the leaflets can be viewed on the website in full. If you prefer to have stocks printed, there is a form on the website to submit your request and Dover District Council will deal with this for you.

The audio version of each leaflet can be activated via the website. Braille and large print will be available on request. This can be done via the ‘Comments page on the website.

If you have any questions or comments, please go to [www.benefit-leaflets.org](http://www.benefit-leaflets.org) or contact me by email cara.duffield@dover.gov.uk

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The beginning of the end for clerical Stats 121 & 122 returns

The first tranche to switch off the clerical Stats 121/122 returns has begun.

Over 130 of you have been invited to switch off your clerical Stats 121/122 returns. This means that from February 2007 (the final extraction of the year) this data, for those of you included, will be derived from your HBSD/IAD Scan return. By the end of January you have received notification inviting you to switch off those returns.

For some of you analysis of your Stats 121/122 data has identified a discrepancy between information derived from the HBSD/IAD Scan and your clerical data returns. If this is the case you have not been invited to switch off your clerical returns on this occasion. You will receive feedback enabling you to identify what needs to be done to meet the criteria.

The switching off of clerical returns relies on the provision of consistent, high quality HBSD/IAD scan data. If you haven’t been invited to switch off your clerical return this time it is important that you continue to return your HBSD/IAD scan data regularly. This is the start of a rolling programme to switch off these clerical returns. Analysis will continue on a monthly basis – to identify, as and when, more of you can meet the criteria and be invited to cease your clerical returns.

An explanation of how the Stats 121/122 data will derived from the HBSD/IAD scan, and full details of the criteria used in identifying those of you that can cease these returns can be found on our website [www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds](http://www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds)

If you have any other queries please contact the Housing Benefit Data Service Team on hbsdiad-scan@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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Important – four week deadline for returning stats

We would like to take this opportunity to remind you of the importance of sending in your statistical returns on time. Unfortunately many LAs are failing to do so and the numbers of authorities submitting their returns late is growing. This not only affects our ability to publish full sets of data, but also reduces the time we can spend in implementing plans that will vastly improve our data collection arrangements.

Therefore, from the fourth quarter of 2006/07 we will be unable to process statistical returns received after the end of the four week return period. Any returns made after this date will not be published on the Department’s internet site, and will not be included in your Chief Executive’s pen picture. The submission periods are published on the HBDS internet website at [http://www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds](http://www.knowledgenetwork.gov.uk/hbds)

By applying strict deadlines we can devote more of our resources to making this burden much easier for you in the future. Our priority is to transform the data collection from the current clerical process to the electronic 100% data extract. This will ease the burden of data collection on you, whilst at the same time improve the quality of information the Department receives. The Department’s aim is to move to a position where you no longer need to return clerical statistics as all information will be collected via the scan.

Before we can end the requirement for clerical returns we will need you to consistently return high quality data, within the deadlines. Please help us to help you!

For further information contact
Email: Larry.Jackson1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk