I appreciate that this is a particularly busy time for you all and I hope that you are managing to deal with the impact of the annual billing exercise, amongst so many other things, as well as possible. And, of course, as I write this we have just over a month to go before we go live with the biggest reform to Housing Benefit for many years – the Local Housing Allowance.

I must say that I am delighted with the feedback we have been getting on your implementation plans. The people I have had a chance to talk to have generally been very enthusiastic about the imminent implementation of LHA and I think we should all be very pleased with how well our approach to rollout is working. Some of you may have recently completed an operational readiness survey, or have even been contacted by one of us here to discuss your implementation plans. I hope you will be patient with us whilst we undertake this business assurance work - but given the scale of change we are talking about I do think it is important that we do as much as we possibly can to ensure a smooth implementation.

If you do have any last minute concerns or questions, it is not too late to ask for any additional support if you think it would be helpful. In the first place, contact our LHA advice line: LHAadvice@dwp.gsi.gov.uk and we will do whatever we can to help.

I am very pleased that in this edition of HB Direct, we can report two helpful developments. First, we are well on the way to restoring the flow of customer data between us. I hope you will have seen a letter from our Permanent Secretary, Leigh Lewis, to your chief executive setting out our plans to implement new encryption software so files can be transferred more securely. It’s an ambitious timescale for the project, but we hope to get this up and running by the end of this month. And second there is an article inside about using SunGard Public Sector’s Bridge product in relation to the Single Housing Benefit Extract. Several of you have written to me about this and I hope you find the article re-assuring. It is critical that we take further steps to enhance the way we communicate with each other and that is why I am doing all I can to promote Government Connect (see also inside) as the best strategic solution. I hope to write more fully on our plans next time.

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

Local Housing Allowance rolls out nationally on 7 April 2008

In less than 24 working days you will all be working on live LHA claims. To help and support you with the implementation we have issued a lot of material containing advice, information and guidance and we thought it might be useful to outline some of the references that you may wish to refer to.

LHA Special Supplement February 2008: Update from the TRS; Safeguards and your Local Authority; LHA and “now lets talk money” campaign; Leeds City Council’s experience; Tips from Blackpool CC

Basic Bank accounts: HB Direct, Issue 73 January 2008

LHA Special Supplement November 2007: Sally’s top tips; Help and support; Backdates prior to LHA and the rate to use; The Rent Service – Locality Review

As always if you have a query on LHA please contact us on

LHAadvice@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
**An update on data transfer between Local Authorities and DWP**

In November 2007, Paul Howarth advised all LAs that the bulk transfer of personal data by disc, tape or memory stick between authorities and DWP was suspended; this decision was taken as a consequence of the reported loss of data between Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the National Audit Office.

The Department’s Permanent Secretary, Leigh Lewis, has recently written to all LA chief executives advising them that DWP has developed a means of encrypting the information transferred between DWP and LAs and that this will allow the resumption of data transfers.

The Permanent Secretary’s letter explains that DWP will bear the cost of purchasing two copies of the encryption software (approved to FIPS 140-2) and will provide them to LAs free of charge. DWP has also made provision for direct support, if required, to your IT teams for the installation of this software. Encryption must be applied to all data files containing sensitive data.

The DWP Data Encryption Team will contact IT Managers within each authority to arrange rollout and implementation of the software. It would be very helpful if you could ask your IT Manager to supply contact details (name, job title, name of authority, telephone number and email address) of an appropriate person to the Encryption Team to the address below:

DATAENCRYPTION.PROJECT@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK

Additionally, the Department is about to re-instate the Knowledge Network website. Our intention is that from March 2008 it will facilitate LA access to statistical forms which will enable LAs to submit data stats 124, 121, and 122 data. We are making good progress in these areas and we will provide further communications at key points.

Can you please ensure that you continue to run HBMS and HBSD-IAD scans at the appropriate times, saving the data to disc and storing the discs in a secure location until DWP advises that the data should be forwarded.

We are particularly keen to ensure that data as of the end of February 2008 is robust as possible as these data will form the basis of the Department’s forecasts of caseload and expenditure for the Budget and Pre-Budget reports.

The Department takes the protection of customer information very seriously and your continued patience is appreciated whilst more secure methods of transmission are being implemented.

If you have any queries please contact

Performance-Framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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**Message from James Plaskitt, Parliamentary Under Secretary at DWP**

I was very disappointed that I was unable to speak at the recent IRRV Conference in Harrogate. At very late notice I was called away to attend the Pensions Bill hearings in the Houses of Parliament and so was unable to deliver my presentation to you on voice risk analysis, a pilot that I have been keenly following. I would like to thank Bob Trahern, IRRV President, for inviting me to speak and Dave White, Head of Jobcentre Plus Fraud Investigation Service, for standing in for me at such short notice. I hope those of you who attended the conference found the presentation interesting and informative.

I chose to talk about voice risk analysis as I believe this cutting edge technology will be another weapon in the battle against benefit fraud. I am delighted our investigators are successfully using sophisticated 21st century techniques to help us defeat benefit cheats.

I am now looking forward to seeing the full results of the evaluation work currently being conducted, as I’m sure are you.

I hope all of you who attended the conference had an enjoyable and productive time and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for the improvements you have made to the administration of Housing Benefit in recent years. In particular for the massive improvements in clearance times and for the outstanding achievement of halving benefit fraud in only three years. I am sure that you are equally keen to be successful in the challenge to tackle error in the benefit system.

James Plaskitt MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary, DWP

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Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Government Connect Secure Extranet

Accessing the Customer Information System

We are pleased to report that DWP has now successfully tested switching access to the Customer Information System (CIS) over to the Government Connect Secure Extranet (GCSx) from the public internet. GCSx is now capable of hosting CIS to all live connected LAs. GCSx is a high-availability, fully managed private network with dedicated bandwidth allocation, and provides secure (with pan-government accreditation), auditable information transfers. The resulting level of service available to you via GCSx rather than over the internet will make the use of CIS more available, more reliable, and more secure.

DWP continues to support the GC programme and is pleased to announce that another nine Regional Seminars are to be run between 4 and 19 March 2008.

These will be aimed specifically at HB/CTB and other service managers, but it would be a good idea to take an IT specialist along too.

For your invitation to one of these events and for more information on what will be covered please visit http://www.govconnect.gov.uk/news/upcoming-events/regional-seminars/

GCSx to be DWP’s preferred option for secure communications with all LAs

At February’s IRRV Benefits conference in Harrogate Paul Howarth declared GCSx to be DWP’s preferred option for secure communications with all LAs. This makes GC an integral part of DWP’s information flows strategy and DWP are encouraging LAs to find out more and to get connected as quickly as possible.

Many delegates clearly listened and more than fifty people visited the joint HB/GC stand. Some visitors were simply asking how far their LA was in the process, while some 13 LAs (some of them ‘Award Winning’) expressed interest in signing up for the first time.

The GC Account Managers are now working with all the contacts made at the IRRV conference and their technical departments to progress the business case for GCSx within their LAs. We will continue to keep you updated on the programme’s progress over the coming months.

Please contact david.wright1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk for further information

Learning and Development

In January’s HB Direct we advised you that Learning and Development were moving their admin services from Hinchley Wood to Epsom. The new admin centre is now in place and contact details at Epsom are:

Address: Epsom Jobcentre Plus, 3rd floor, 50 East Street, Epsom, Surrey KT17 1HQ.

Tel: 01372 853323
Fax: 01372 853367

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 Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Bridge – An accepted transmission mechanism for the Single Housing Benefit Extract

Many of you will be users of SunGard Public Sector’s (formerly Aspiren) Bridge product which has been deployed to LAs as part of the National Performance Management Framework (NPMF) programme. This initiative received funding from the DWP performance standards fund for its first year of operation.

For the past two years the Bridge product has been facilitating the pre-validation, cleansing and secure transmission of the STATS 121, 122, 124 and 124A returns.

Bridge has been keeping pace with the move away from the Department’s reliance on these returns and we can confirm that the product will be an accepted validation and cleansing mechanism for the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE). Additionally, when an LA requests it, we are committed to transmitting the SHBE directly to DWP in accordance with their approved technical solution.

The main features of the Bridge product are

- the ability to derive STATS 121, 122 and 124 and a new performance indicator report (2008) from the claimant level data contained in the SHBE file using the DWP derivation rules so that LAs can see what impact the SHBE file has on their level of performance
- a sophisticated search function; so that users can identify and view data anomalies that are held within the SHBE file
- an edit function is available in order to ensure the accuracy of the data within the SHBE file, and
- the secure transmission of a cleansed SHBE file along with a full audit log

Further information

Neil Chivers, National Product Manager, SunGard Public Sector
Email: neil.chivers@aspiren.com

Jan Ripley, Performance Partner, Housing Benefit Database & Matching Service, DWP
Email: Jan.Ripley@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

The Social Security (Local Authority Investigations and Prosecutions) Regulations 2008

Following consultation on the above regulations, made under sections 46 and 47 of the Welfare Reform Act 2007, they have now been laid before Parliament so enabling them to come into force on 7 April 2008.

Should you so wish you will then be able to investigate fraud against certain national benefits, when also investigating fraud against HB or CTB in the same case. You will also be able to continue this investigation even if the HB or council tax element of the investigation is not affected.

LAs in England and Wales will also be able to prosecute fraud against the same national benefits, regardless of whether they bring proceedings against the HB or CTB.

The national benefits covered are Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, State Pension Credit and Employment and Support Allowance.

Further detailed guidance on how these new powers will operate in practice will be issued in a circular shortly.

Graham Dove
Email: Graham.Dove@dwp.gsi.gov.uk