I am writing this (on 26 November) on my way back from attending a meeting of the IRRV South Wales regional association, and I am very grateful to Helen Stokes and colleagues for their kind hospitality at Merthyr. We had a full and enjoyable discussion about topical issues: the impact of wider welfare reform on Housing Benefit (ESA in particular, including the difficult better buy problem), and the outcome of the Heffernan case on locality reviews, and the decision to restrict the LHA to the five bedroom rate, which led us to debate fairness and work incentives taking account of where those on relatively low incomes in work can afford to rent.

We looked at further options for simplification, in particular the case for getting rid of non-dependant deductions and the announcements on Child Benefit in the Pre-Budget Report. Importantly, we discussed the facts that caseloads are increasing significantly as a result of the economic downturn, and my colleague Ilona Blue hopes to say more about the implications of that next time.

The general view was that LHA was a helpful and worthwhile reform and there were few issues arising on aspects such as direct payments and deciding vulnerability. I promised that, in any future reforms, we would try our best to take account of the range of housing markets across the country, which are of course very different. In South Wales it is relatively easy to find accommodation at LHA levels in some areas but more difficult in other areas.

Altogether, we had an interesting and topical discussion which was certainly helpful to me, and I hope to everyone. I am sure that there will be further topical discussion at the Scottish IRRV benefits conference this week! All of these issues are being considered in the Housing Benefit review. We expect the forthcoming White Paper on welfare reform to cover some of the main themes, and we are currently planning more specific consultation on Housing Benefit in the New Year.

Finally, can I take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas – have a really good break.

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

Correction to U2/2008

HB/CTB Bulletin U2/2008 issued on 26 November 2008 described the early Child Benefit (ChB) uprating from January 2009 announced in the Pre Budget Report.

Unfortunately, the dates for the end of the disregard period in cases where the rent is paid on a weekly basis were incorrect. In these cases, the period of the disregard will end on 5 April 2009 (para 2, U2/2008) and the full amount of ChB once again taken into account from 6 April 2009 (para 3 U2/2008).

Please direct any enquiries to Richard.Metcalfe@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Performance and Good Practice Guide – Performance Planning Tool for LAs

We have replaced the Performance Planning Tool (PPT) with an updated edition to meet the requirements of the new HB/CTB performance framework.

By entering your local performance targets, you can use this tool to plan and monitor performance against the ‘right time’ performance indicator and the key management indicators (KMIs).

We appreciate you can only use the tool for the remainder of the performance year but expect that you will find it useful to chart your progress to date and to plan for the remainder of the year.


If you experience any problems using the tool or have suggestions for enhancements you can contact us at Performance-framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Revised Memorandum of Understanding – access to CIS

Paul Howarth, Head of HB Strategy, sent a letter to all authorities on 11 November 2008 regarding the issue of the revised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which covers access to DWP and HMRC customer information held on CIS.

Can I please remind you that the declaration on page 9 of the MoU must be fully completed and returned to DWP.

This year we will be happy to accept returns electronically, for example in PDF format. Copies of the revised MoU and LA CIS Guide are now available on the Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme area of the website.

http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/information-flow/whats-new/

Further information

The letter sent out with the MoU on 11 November advises that the return of the declaration is due by 5 December 2008. This will ensure your access to CIS is maintained.

If you require any further information please contact

Malcolm Mattack – email: malcolm.mattack@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Mont Goldman – email: mont.goldman@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Any LA unable to supply an electronic return can send a clerical return to DWP

Housing Benefit Information Flows Programme
Malcolm Mattack
1st Floor
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1A 9NA

Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Pensions Reform – impact on Working Age Benefits and other pensioner benefits

In previous editions we have provided information about the reforms to State Pension being introduced from 6 April 2010. Alongside these reforms the State Pension Age for women born between or after 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1955 is already set to gradually increase from 60 to 65, so that by 2020 it will be the same as for men. As a consequence of these changes the qualifying age for a number of other benefits will also change as follows:

- the age at which men and women can apply for Pension Credit, and Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit for pensioners, will increase
- between 2010 and 2020 the maximum age up to which both men and women will be able to receive Income Support will rise in phases to 65 in line with the increase in women’s State Pension age
- the benefits below will rise in line with the gradual increase in women’s State Pension age but the increase only applies to women. Men already receive these benefits up until age 65
  - Incapacity Benefit
  - Jobseeker’s Allowance
  - Employment and Support Allowance
  - Reduced Earnings Allowance, and
  - Bereavement Benefit
- the qualifying age for Winter Fuel Payments will gradually increase and means that from winter 2010/11 onwards, both men and women will need to have reached women's State Pension age by the end of the September qualifying week

Under pension reforms the State Pension age for both men and women will rise again in phases to 68. This affects anyone born on or after 6 April 1959 and will occur between 2024 and 2046.

For further information about Pensions Reform contact Elizabeth Ruffley on 01253 688 579 or visit the Pension Service Intranet site http://www.thepensionservice.gov.uk/

Right Benefit Toolkit

In HB Direct Issue 83 we told you about the recently launched Right Benefit Toolkit aimed at helping you improve the level of correctness in your case loads.

We particularly wanted to draw your attention to the tracking template. The template, which can be downloaded, has been designed to help you plan activities, and track your progress against the Right Benefit indicator.

It contains a number of excel worksheets each with different functions, beginning with data entry which feeds through to others that

- bring together MI supporting Right Benefit in one place
- identify the expected costs for the year
- quickly identify good/bad/changed performance

The template can be used as a standalone toolkit. Alternatively, the toolkit could be integrated into your software to better support your needs. DWP has led two presentations at software providers user groups (Capita and IBS). Other presentations can be arranged on demand.

If you have any questions about how to use the toolkit or would like to hear more about the tracking template then you can get in contact with Simon Lunn via email simon.lunn@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or by phone 0207 449 5361. Simon is particularly keen to hear from any authorities who would like to work closely with us in showcasing this product at the next IRRV Benefits conference.

Don’t forget to visit the security area on the HB website http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/security/ to gain access to the other products that make up the Right Benefit Toolkit.
‘We’re Closing In’ TV ads

As the national roll out of the latest targeting benefit thieves campaign continues, the Department for Work & Pensions is making the TV commercials available free to those LAs that use plasma screens to communicate to their customers.

The two 30 second commercials, ‘Cash-in-hand’ and ‘Living Together’ are available on DVD and can be used to raise awareness of benefit fraud to both staff and the general public.

To request your copy, please send your authority contact details and full delivery address to comms.supportteam@dwp.gsi.gov.uk. All we ask in return is that you complete a short questionnaire about the campaign materials provided to LAs.

LAs play a valuable part in the fight against benefit fraud and we want you to link to the campaign whether you are one of the selected areas or not. To view the areas selected, including the ten additional LAs joining the campaign in January 2009, go to www.dwp.gov.uk/benefit-thieves/local-authorities where you can also download poster templates which you can customise with your own details.

For more details contact Tony Oakland-Smith 0113 232 4479

Changes to the distribution arrangements for HB Direct

HB Direct was first introduced as a newsletter more than six years ago. We are now up to Issue 84 with the format and style remaining almost unchanged. The distribution arrangements have also remained unchanged with the newsletter being issued by email, by post where requested, as well as being made available on the DWP website.

We have recently carried out an internal review of HB Direct and whilst the format and style of the newsletter still works we have decided that, for a variety of reasons, as of March 2009 we will no longer be issuing HB Direct as a hard copy publication.

If you currently receive HB Direct by post and need to continue to receive it after March 2009 then you will need to make sure that you submit your email address, first name, surname & name of organisation/company, to HB-Direct@cds.co.uk

As HB Direct is published on the DWP website you may want to reconsider receiving your own personal copy of the newsletter.

Further information is available from Kath.Murphy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

89% of LAs using HBAAlerts from HBLearning

Since its launch in January 2006, HBLearning has provided a cost-effective e-learning solution for Benefits practitioners and 89% of LAs are now signed up to the free HBAAlert circular summary service available through the HBLearning website.

HBLearning’s modular courseware covers all areas of HB/CTB and has recently been updated to include a stand alone ESA module. Whether you are a new starter or an experienced practitioner you can use the intuitive menu to access almost 600 elements of learning/reference material within seconds.

The complex legislation has been carefully broken down and reworked into small logical learning units, making them easier to process and absorb. Tools such as workflows and tables have been created to help you understand how these learning units piece together to form processes and concepts.

Through the use of professionally designed graphic images, the courseware brings the legislation to life and makes it much easier to remember than text alone with every one of the pictures in HBLearning specifically designed to convey a concept.

Numerous case studies are provided to allow you to apply your knowledge in real-life scenarios and hundreds of carefully crafted questions are delivered using a range of different question formats and styles.

Visit HBLearning at www.hblearning.co.uk and take a three minute tour or sign-up for the HBAAlerts service.

For further information contact Andy Woodward andrew.woodward@capita.co.uk

Season’s Greetings

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