The highlight of the month is that we now have a Welfare Reform Act. So the Local Housing Allowance is definitely coming, along with quite a few other measures (please see inside for more details). We are also going ahead with the HB sanction for anti-social behaviour for those people who refuse an offer of rehabilitation after eviction. We will pilot this in eight LAs. If we then decide to extend it, we will have to legislate again. (This position was agreed during debates on the Bill.) So, after a lot of delay and frustration about when we would legislate for HB reform, and what exactly would be involved, it is heartening that we now have finally made it!

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending a meeting of Essex benefit managers at Castle Point Council. Understandably, there were a lot of questions for me about the LHA (amongst many other things). It was good to hear that Essex authorities intend to get together to exchange ideas, and perhaps share some of the preparation for LHA. This seems an eminently sensible thing to do and I’m sure other groups will think about it too. And a big thank you to the Pathfinder and Second Wave authorities. They have pioneered the LHA and made it a real success. I am particularly pleased that they continue to offer their help and advice to everyone else, including us! They will, for example, be on hand at the regional seminars we are organising. We certainly owe them a lot.

Of course, the Welfare Reform Act also means that Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is now on the way. This will replace Incapacity Benefit and there will, as ever, be implications for HB. We are currently working hard to understand how best to modify HB to allow for, and complement, the introduction of ESA. We have a working group in place with local authority representation. You will read much more about this in the coming months!

Finally, you will find inside an invitation to apply for a short secondment to help with what promises to be a very exciting venture. After the success of a trial at Wallsend, involving North Tyneside Council, to find ways of improving processes for those moving in and out of work, we are now intending to start pilots in six areas. This will allow us to test more changes (across Jobcentre Plus, HMRC and LAs) but also begin to see what might be scalable more generally. Again, we would hope to introduce changes in 2008 alongside the work we are already doing to improve information flows and streamline administration. This is of course an important part of the efficiency agenda we are all jointly involved in. So 2008 looks set to be another year of significant change in the HB world!

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

Service Level Agreement between Tribunals Service and LAs (HB/CTB)

The SLA between the Tribunals Service and LAs (HB/CTB) that has been subject to consultation with your associations can be found at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/model/nat-sla-la-ts.pdf

You should now make arrangements for the agreement to be signed with your appropriate Tribunals Service Regional Manager, contact details supplied at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/model/sla-ts-la.pdf

All enquiries should be directed to your Tribunal Service Regional Manager, whose contact details are available using the web link quoted above.
Welfare Reform Act

The Welfare Reform Bill received Royal Assent on 3 May and became an Act. Amongst other things the Act contains powers to
• rollout the LHA across the de-regulated private rented sector
• encourage more social sector tenants to manage their own rent payments
• pilot an HB sanction for those who are evicted for anti-social behaviour, and
• replace Incapacity Benefit with an Employment and Support Allowance and this will also impact on HB

Additionally, the Act
• contains improved rules for extended payments
• widens the information sharing gateways for HB in connection with Supporting People grants
• enables greater sharing and use of benefit information
• will allow LAs to investigate and prosecute against national benefits (reversing the ‘Howell’ ruling)
• improves the Secretary of State’s Direction powers so he can take appropriate action when administration of HB/CTB is unacceptable, and
• clarifies the LA discretionary scheme in respect of war pensions

We are working on draft regulations in many of these areas and will be consulting your associations on them in the weeks and months to come.

For further information about the HB measures in the Act please contact Danielle.Wells@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Local Authority Omnibus Surveys

Please note that in the May edition of HB Direct, content information for the final report for wave-13 of the LA Omnibus was incorrect and should have read as follows.

Local Authority Omnibus Survey, final report for wave-13

The final report for wave-13 of the LA Omnibus Survey was available for download from the DWP website on Thursday, 10 May. The URL address for the publication will be http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rreports2007-2008/rrep414.pdf

The survey sections for wave-13 were
Section A: Performance Standards Fund
Section B: Claim Forms and Rapid Reclaim
Section C: Cheque Cashing
Section D: Organisational Models
Section E: Reporting changes in circumstances
Section F: Working with Jobcentre Plus
Section G: Contracting Out
Section H: Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI)
Section I: Decentralisation and Contact Information

Local Authority Omnibus Survey, summary report for wave-14

The summary report for wave-14 of the LA Omnibus Survey will be available for download from the DWP website on Tuesday, 5 June. The URL address for the publication will be http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/summ2007-2008/440summ.pdf

The survey sections for wave-14 are
Section A: Information
Section B: Business Processes Re-engineering
Section C: Local Housing Allowance
Section D: DWP Housing Benefit Web Site
Section E: Financial Inclusion Activity
Section F: Better Off Calculation
Section G: Decentralisation and Contact Information
Secondment opportunity

Looking for a new challenge in 2007? Interested in cross-government working?

We are a small DWP/HMRC joint project team that is looking at how, through joint-working, we can deliver improved customer service to customers moving in and out of work. Following a successful pilot in the North East, significant customer improvements have been achieved and consequently we are now looking to set up a further six pilots nationwide to test more efficient ways of sharing customer information between DWP/HMRC and LAs. The results from these pilots will determine whether to scale up the processes nationally.

We are looking for a pro-active, positive individual who has a good working knowledge of HB processes and the interfaces with Jobcentre Plus to join our team on secondment. We need someone who has (or could form) good contacts with the LGA, COSLA, ALG and with LA chief executives. The applicant should be someone who is flexible, adaptable and prepared to fully integrate into our small project team (and that means being asked to pick up a variety of work), but primarily the focus would be in the following areas

- Developing relationships across DWP/HMRC and LAs to ensure project objectives are met.
- Representing LA interests and bringing knowledge to the table of implementation issues, planning requirements, processes, costings, evaluation etc.
- Stakeholder management including LA chief executives and other LA stakeholders.
- Providing practical help and support in the development of products and processes in the pilot areas.
- Support the Project Manager to develop solutions and resolution of issues and risks.

We think that this secondment would provide the right pro-active and positive individual with an excellent opportunity to develop further their experience and skills in this exciting area of work. Having the right approach and background experience is more important to us than current grade or position.

Location: Preferably Leeds, Newcastle, Lytham or London with frequent travel and some overnight stays required.

Duration: Starting as soon as possible — and likely to run to around December 2007.

For further information please contact Leigh Wright by email Leigh.Wright@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk

Closing date: Friday 22 June 2007

Jobcentre Plus to push HB and CTB as in-work benefits

DWP has launched a campaign to promote HB and CTB to people who are currently out of work. Ministers are keen to promote both benefits as ‘in-work’ benefits for people of working age who are currently out of work. Many Jobcentre Plus customers wrongly assume that if they begin work they will automatically be ineligible for HB or CTB and this lack of understanding can act as a barrier to employment.

Jobcentre Plus staff are soon to be issued with desk aids and guidance on how much HB and/or CTB a customer will be able to claim. Further communications work with both customers and staff will be undertaken over the coming months.

For further information about this campaign please contact Laura Graham

DWP Marketing Communications
Tel: 0113 232 4479
**Customer Management System (CMS) Release 6**

Customer Management System (CMS) Release 6 is scheduled to be available to Jobcentre Plus users from Monday, 11 June 2007. We are committed to continue to work with Jobcentre Plus toward the improvement of the information received from CMS via the Local Authority Input Document (LAID). This includes

- the introduction of changes to reflect legislative changes
- improvements to the business process

Release 6 includes a number of improvements and the following should be of interest to you

- CMS will support the extension of SMP and MA entitlement to 39 weeks for women whose expected week of confinement is on or after 1 April 2007
- the removal of reply slips from the LAID. Cases will automatically be deleted from CMS one calendar month after they have been transferred to the LA. This will improve the operation of the CMS system and removes the current clerical process of ‘receipting’ the LAID
- new outputs where the customer and/or their partner is No Fixed Address (NFA). The residential address will no longer display as ‘Unanswered’ on the Customer Statement and LAID. The correspondence address will continue to be displayed on the Customer Statement and LAID. **NFA** will be displayed on the front of the LAID
- an additional question and response relating to ‘Current Work pay rises for the Customer and Partner’ are being included in the LAID
- improvements to the mandatory text to advise the customer what information/evidence they need to bring/send in to support their claim

We are continuing to develop and deliver, where possible, changes to CMS to reflect relevant legislative changes and agreed business improvements for you within future releases. We will continue to consult with you on various continuing pieces of work being undertaken toward this end.

If you have any questions arising from these changes or broader aspects of working with Jobcentre Plus please contact Colin Heward by email: 📨 HBSDMP.WWEG@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

---

**Local Housing Allowance**

As you will probably know by now, the Welfare Reform Bill has received Royal Assent and the Local Housing Allowance is now a reality. I am also happy to tell you that the implementation date has now been agreed and the LHA will go live on 7 April 2008. That means you have ten months to get your authority ready for the LHA. But don't worry - we're here to help you!

You've told us that the two things you need most in order to successfully implement the LHA are funding and guidance. **HB/CTB Circular S3/2007** provided you with information about funding and we hope to send out these payments within the next month or two. We will also provide you with guidance in the form of Task Sheets, which will guide you through the implementation tasks that have proved successful with the Pathfinder and Second Wave Group authorities, and a working draft of the LHA Guidance Manual. Together, these should give you much of what you need to begin the implementation process.

We will shortly be sending draft regulations to your associations for consultation, which will be a significant step along the road to completing the necessary legislation. Once regulations are finalised, we will be able to provide you with a definitive version of the LHA Guidance Manual.

We will also be running a series of regional seminars during July and September. These events will bring together speakers from the Rent Service, the Implementation Team and those LAs who are operating the LHA right now, and will provide an excellent opportunity to meet other authorities working through the same issues as you. Our partners, Oxygen Marketing, have recently sent out invitations to you – please book your places as soon as possible by visiting the seminar website at 🌐 www.lharegionalseminars.org

Over the next ten months, we will provide you with regular updates on the LHA including the experiences of the Pathfinder/2WG authorities who have already been through this process. If you have any queries in the meantime, please email them to: 📨 LHAadviceline@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

---

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