Editorial

We’re now less that six months away from the start of the April 2013 reforms and there’s a lot of work under way to help prepare customers for the changes. Potential Benefit Cap customers will be receiving their third letter shortly and you are also preparing social sector tenants for the introduction of the size criteria rules.

The DWP consultants and the ATLAS team are continuing to provide support to authorities as you bed in ATLAS in your teams. I’m very grateful to the team in South Norfolk for sharing their story with us this month.

The ATLAS team has recently extended its remit to support the automated data transfer requirements of the DWP change programmes. There’s an update this month from the LADS team setting out what will be available from April 2013.

Look out for the Universal Credit special edition of HB Direct issued soon.

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Distribution enquiries
Civil Penalties Frequently Asked Questions

A number of questions have been raised by local authorities (LAs) in response to recent articles regarding the introduction of Civil Penalties. The most frequently asked questions and the answers provided, have been compiled, and can now be accessed via the attached link. A contact e-mail address is included at the end of the document for any follow up enquiries.

To support LAs in making a decision about taking up Civil Penalties, or implementing them, an Implementation Guide and Learning and Development product are currently under development and will be available by the end of October.

FAQ document - [http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/la-civil-penalties-frequently-asked-questions.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/la-civil-penalties-frequently-asked-questions.pdf)


Amendments to Housing Benefit Size Criteria pages on DWP website

Social Sector Size Criteria Products

Now we are in autumn local authorities should be well under way in preparing for the introduction of size criteria rules into the social rented sector, due to come in to force on 1 April 2013. In addition to the toolkit that was published in Adjudication and Operations Circular A4/2012, there are now further communications products available on the DWP website to help communicate the message about the forthcoming changes to Housing Benefit (HB) and what tenants can do to prepare. The additional products consist of a poster, which you may wish to display in public areas, and a factsheet aimed at HB claimants and other people asking about the changes.

These can be found along with the other products (letters and leaflets) on the [size criteria page of the DWP website](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/la-application-recovery-housing-benefit.pdf), to be downloaded to use as part of your awareness campaigns.
ATLAS Journey

When ATLAS was first implemented in South Norfolk during July 2011, we were overwhelmed by the increased volume of work that was downloaded daily and were faced with an extra 33% of changes in circumstances to process.

As is the norm here, we discussed the issues with our assessment team and set up a sub group, who volunteered to test the data every day to check the Civica system capabilities.

After six months, we had gained enough confidence in the data and software to start batch processing the ATLAS reports. This was dealt with tentatively at first for Tax Credits only and the affected claims were still checked to ensure that the work items were processed correctly.

Meanwhile the period between July 2011 and December 2011 we had lost key staff and by Christmas 30% of the benefits processing staff had either left or retired. This meant we were in backlog situation going into Year End.

There is of course a knock-on effect with ATLAS when there is a backlog; each piece of data represents a claim that needs to be re-assessed and that claim often has had other changes as well sitting in a queue waiting to be processed so the whole claim needs to be looked at. This means that in most cases it is not simply a matter of the IT system processing the data without some sort of manual intervention.

By April 2012 the backlog of ATLAS reports had continued to grow alongside the new claims and changes already accumulating and it was the norm to regularly see over one thousand reports waiting to be dealt with.

We continued to analyse the data and have extended the parameters for batch processing the reports and are currently completing forty two percent of the ATLAS reports by utilising the Civica system. The remaining reports are still administered manually but we are continually interrogating the work to extend batch processing further.

With an increase in staffing, at present we are clearing more ATLAS reports on a daily basis - our output is at last greater than the input enabling us to catch up. We are also confident that we will be able to batch process more items as Civica provide more enhancements to do so and we can ensure that these are accurate.

We have learned that ATLAS is a really useful tool in benefits administration but in order to gain the most it is crucial to be up to date and not have a backlog. ATLAS is the future as far as benefits administration is concerned, especially with Universal Credit on the horizon, so it is important that we strive for improved ways of working to continue to deliver an excellent service to our customers.

Local Authority Data Sharing Delivery Team Update

The Local Authority Data Sharing (LADS) Delivery Team recently implemented the Automated Transfer to Local Authority Systems (ATLAS). Currently the ATLAS notifications provide HMRC and DWP award and personal customer data quickly and securely to LAs. Savings from the provision of these notifications are on schedule to save the estimated £763 million over the initial five year period from go-live.

We are now implementing a number of initiatives on top of the existing ATLAS functionality and the following update provides some detail of the initiatives the LADS Delivery Team are scheduled to implement for April 2013.

ETD Replacement

Following the ATLAS Phase 2 implementation LAs have been required to handle notifications for DWP benefits that can also be delivered via the Electronic Transfer of Data (ETD) notification. From April 2013 we aim to merge the ETD data with the ATLAS, meaning duplication will be a thing of the past. The ATLAS notifications will provide information on non-dependants and Pension Credit Assessed Income information, including capital, earnings, and occupational pensions.

LAs will receive only one transaction (ATLAS) instead of two (ATLAS and ETD), increasing the ability to process notifications without manual intervention (batch processing).

The approach we are taking is to continue to provide benefit award information and personal detail changes via the Customer Information System (CIS), and those items of data not available via CIS will be sourced direct from the DWP IT systems.

As a contingency measure ETDs will continue to be delivered post implementation. This dual running period will allow LAs to obtain assurance that ATLAS is delivering all the data that both ATLAS and ETD currently deliver.

Personal Independence Payments (PIP)

As per Housing Benefit Direct issue 129 September 2012 (Changes to disability benefits from April 2013), PIP will come into force from April 2013. ATLAS will provide LAs with all the required data for the new benefit. The PIP data will be provided in the existing ATLAS file along with the other DWP/HMRC notifications. In the meantime questions about PIP implementation should be raised to the PIP project.

Benefit Cap

We aim to use the ATLAS functionality to send across a notification that indicates when Benefit Cap is appropriate and provide the current amount of DWP/HMRC benefits in payment to the LA customer’s household. ATLAS will also continue to provide details of any DWP/HMRC new awards, change in circumstances or terminations that affect Housing Benefit and/or Local Council Tax Reduction customers. If you have any questions about implementation you should contact the Benefit Cap project.
IT Suppliers liaison

We are working closely with your LA IT suppliers, supported by LA volunteer representatives, to ensure a smooth transition to the improved service that these initiatives will supply.

ATLAS uprating of PSCS benefits

The LADS Delivery Team are aiming to provide the PSCS benefit bulk uprating files via ATLAS in December 2012, but we are still liaising with CIS to confirm delivery. The PSCS benefits are: Incapacity Benefit (IB), Widows Benefit (WB), Maternity Allowance (MA), Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA), and Bereavement Benefit (BB).

As contingency please be prepared to complete percentile uprating, as completed in previous years, for those affected benefits.

The uprating for IS, JSA, ESA and PC will provide bulk uprating from January to March 2013, as per last year. This is because these benefits provide uprating files using a more staggered approach over a period of time, rather than a single file on one day.

If you have any queries about the ATLAS/LA data sharing aspect of these initiatives please contact us via: QH.HBINFOFLOWSPROGRAMME@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK using your GSx/GCSx.e-mail, or use the contact details on the HBIFP ATLAS webpage.