Editorial

As you know, my colleague Ilona Blue and I wrote to all Chief Executives on 27 June about likely changes to the Housing Benefit Administration Subsidy we pay to LAs. The assumption is that we will reduce the Administration Subsidy by 5 per cent (in real terms) a year from April 2008, in line with the Department’s own spending review settlement. As you might imagine, we have received a number of replies. Where possible, we will continue to reply to individual letters; but it simply hasn’t been possible to cover every point that has been made. We have also created a frequently asked questions part of the website where we aim to cover some of the main points, see www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/letters/2007.asp. So do refer regularly to that. And we recognise the need to continue to communicate as much as possible to you and your associations, both through our normal consultation arrangements and through publications like this.

The key thing I want to stress is that this is a challenge for all of us in the public sector. We are not treating LAs any differently in this respect. My Department has to rise to the challenge of its spending review settlement; and that is why we have in place a comprehensive Change Programme to find ways of serving our customers better, but at less cost.

I am also acutely aware that recent changes to the subsidy allocation formula are still feeding through because of the transitional protection arrangements we agreed with your associations. This will complicate matters as it will mean that the exact level of reduction will vary across authorities with some facing more and others less than 5 per cent. Indeed, some authorities will receive an increase in resource compared to 2007-08 to reflect increases in caseload and other factors. This is because we have changed the distribution formula to make it fairer to all authorities.

We are committed to ensuring that DWP continues to support authorities’ efforts to transform the services they provide to customers. We are doing this in two ways. We are continuing to build on the success of the RATS replacement programme to bring in better links to information you need, and we are introducing more efficient processes such as the automatic collection of HB data. And we are looking to provide a support role to the extent that you and your associations regard it as useful. Our Performance Development Team will support individual LAs, or groups of authorities, to introduce specific programmes to deliver efficiencies. And we will do everything we can to broadcast good ideas and spread good practice.

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

Derwent Dispatches – the sequel

“Well now the summer has come and gone – ours happened on August 6 and we can once again focus on our PM10 results.”

To find out more about how the North East are tackling PM10, read Ian Ferguson’s update on the DWP Fraud & Error website, where you’ll also find his original article from April.

www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/secure/fraud-error.asp
Performance Development Team – help available with Local Housing Allowance implementation

The Performance Development Team (PDT) comprises 15 performance specialists and works with individual and groups of LAs to help them become more efficient and improve performance.

PDT help is free, but LAs have to invest the time and resources needed to achieve improvements. LAs are responsible for delivering improvement plans. In return for our investment, the PDT simply asks that authorities keep DWP informed of progress so that it can be sure improvements in the delivery of public services are realised.

The PDT is available to assist LAs with help preparing for the implementation of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in areas such as

- clearing backlogs of work prior to implementation
- reviewing and improving processes
- monitoring performance
- developing robust plans for implementation

For further information or to request help, contact Cheryl Weaver
☎ 020 7712 2280 or 07771 844175
Email: cheryl.weaver@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Alternatively, you can write to:
Performance Development Team
Department for Work and Pensions
5th Floor, The Adelphi
1–11 John Adam Street
London WC2N 6HT

National Benefit Leaflets Project Update

A big thank you to all LAs who agreed to contribute £100 towards the ongoing work on the National Benefit Leaflets Project.

With the contributions received we will produce a leaflet for LHA and a promotional flyer for change of circumstances. As with the leaflets already on the website, they will be translated, Crystal Marked and available in Braille and Large Print.

If your LA is still interested in contributing but not yet returned the invoice request form which was sent to you in July, please contact me as soon as possible.

I received a response from 22% of you so there are still a lot of LAs I haven’t heard from.

For such a small sum of money you can achieve a significant Gershon saving, take away the task of writing and updating all your leaflets and receive a discount on printing orders for the new leaflet and flyer.

If you would like to contribute or have any questions or comments, please go to www.benefit-leaflets.org or contact me by email cara.duffield@dover.gov.uk
LA CMS Guidance Updated

Ongoing legislative changes and continuous improvement initiatives have meant that since the last production of the LA Guide to Customer Management System (CMS) there have been several changes to the scope and operation of CMS. As a result, the guide has been revisited and extensively updated to take account of these changes. The new version is available at www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/cms/2007/la_guide.pdf

This version should replace any existing copies held within your LA. If you have any questions relating to the updated guidance please contact Colin Heward hbsdmp.wweg@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Tax Credits Data

The HB Information Flows Programme is working with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Customer Information System (CIS) to provide Tax Credit data on CIS from Spring 2008. The data items to be shown are based on the current data obtained by the secure email route and the items provided on the Customer Award Notice. This will mean that HB/CTB assessors will have access to Tax Credit award information within 24 hours of a claim being processed by HMRC. This will reduce under and overpayments for the customer and improve HB and CTB claim processing times.

Further information will be available in future editions of HB Direct and via the General Information Bulletins.

Jo Wood
Email: jo.wood@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Work: Breaking the barrier

Despite the fact that HB and CTB are a valuable part of the financial support available to people in work, as well as out of work, we know that many people aren’t aware of this. This must sometimes act as a barrier and affect whether people decide to try and get a job, not knowing that they could be financially better off if they did.

Your role in efficiently administering HB/CTB helps ease our customers’ transition into work and to support them in employment. We are very keen to work together with you and Jobcentre Plus to help overcome barriers to work and increase our customers’ understanding and awareness of in-work HB/CTB.

What we plan to do is carry out a targeted mailshot and we would very much like some of you to help with this. The mailshot will involve writing to customers getting HB/CTB and who we know are out of work to show them how much better off they would be if they took a job. The letters would relate to hypothetical jobs, but would contain benefit calculations tailored to customers’ individual circumstances.

Would your LA like to help with design and delivery of a mailshot pilot? Funding and support will be available for the work involved. If you are interested and would like to be considered to take part in this pilot, please email contact details to john.kennett@dwp.gsi.gov.uk We will then consider suitable combinations of LAs and Jobcentre Plus Offices to take the work forward.

Update on Local Housing Allowance

All LAs should by now, have received the LHA rollout funding. Payments were made in August and should reflect the amounts covered in HB/CTB Circular S3/2007.

As part of the assurance connected to the rollout funding, we may be looking at how LHA is being implemented in your authority, by confirming that certain activities have been carried out. This will enable us to provide assurance to DWP governance boards that LAs will be ‘operationally ready’ for rollout. We will be in touch with you in the near future regarding this.

If you have queries about your LHA rollout funding or anything else, please contact us on LHAadvice@nhs.net
Joint Working Initiative for those moving in and out of work

Customers say that delays in processing their benefits act as a barrier to them taking up employment, particularly short term work. To tackle this, a joint DWP/HMRC/LA project is looking at how, through working more closely together, an improved service to customers moving in and out of work can be delivered.

A successful trial in the North East showed significant customer improvements, particularly in HB and CTB, reducing processing times by more than half. To see if these benefits can be realised on a wider scale and to test more efficient ways of sharing customer information between DWP, HMRC and LAs, pilots have been set up in six LA areas

- Lambeth
- Liverpool
- Merthyr Tydfil
- Sedgemoor
- West Lothian
- West Somerset

The results from these pilots will determine whether to scale up the processes nationally. The pilots will start in early September 2007 and are expected to run for three months.

The pilot will involve all JSA customers and IS customers who require a face to face interview at Jobcentre Plus. Customers with any element of IB in their claim are not affected.

The major changes are

- a customer statement will be given to the customer at their interview, rather than by post, to enable a far quicker interview date to be given
- the customer will be phoned to remind them of their interview date and, in some cases, reminded precisely what evidence they should bring with them to their interview
- Jobcentre Plus will request evidence required for HB/CTB that is not needed for a JSA or IS claim (e.g. tenancy agreements, non-dependants earnings, etc.) This will be copied, authenticated and forwarded to the LA along with the LA Input Document
- customers will also be issued with an Into Work Statement to fill in and send back to Jobcentre Plus on their return to work. This contains details of their new employment to allow HB/CTB and tax credit to be adjusted more swiftly

A full description of the process will be included in the HB/CTB General Information Bulletin issued on 7 September 2007. For any further questions please contact Colin Heward at hbsdmp.wweg@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Government Connect

As part of our ongoing commitment to improving the delivery of benefits and services to customers, DWP is working in partnership with Government Connect (GC) to provide secure electronic communications between DWP and LAs.

GC provides LAs with a secure way to send emails and data to central government departments and to other LAs.

In Scotland, LAs are already connected with central government through the GSX link; in England, GC has set an aggressive target of ensuring all 388 LAs are actively benefiting from GC by March 2008 using GCSx; ongoing work to connect Welsh LAs will see tremendous benefits brought about through the implementation of a common secure system.

DWP has already achieved service improvements through the HB Information Flows Programme (formerly ITIFLA) – GC will provide the opportunity for further improvements in efficiency through being able to send much more sensitive information online, quickly, easily and accurately.

For more detailed information on the GC programme, please visit the Government Connect website.

A more detailed article, covering the Housing Benefit Strategy Division’s work with GC and the service transformation we are hoping to deliver using GC can be found on the HB Information Flows web pages on the Department’s website.

You can also contact HBSD direct about its work with GC, by email

David.wright1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk or Malcolm.mattack@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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