



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 29 July 2015

Location: Caxton House Room 6.03

Attendees: **DWP:** Bill Hern (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Simon McCullough, Ronnie Haynes, Debbie Whetton
Dial in: Wayne Norfolk, Paul Coombs, Robert Irvine

LAAs: Paul Ellary, Gwyn Thomas, June Deans, Chris Boylett, Mark Gillmore Frankie Cartwright
Dial-in: Martin O'Neill, Pamela Richardson, John Rosenbloom, Tricia Smith, Les Robertson, Jean Cheeseman

Apologies: Clare Elliott, Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank, Matthew Evans, Andrew Hyatt, Charles Taylor, Iain Marshalsay, Carol Cleland, Paula Doherty

1. Welcome and Introductions:

DWP opened the meeting and introductions were made round the table and for those dialling in.

2. Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

Action Points

AP Oct 04 2014; the action point remains ongoing.

AP Feb 01 2015: POG asked whether a review of the new practices has been carried out. POG is keen to know whether its recommendations have contributed to a successful outcome. It was agreed to invite the Housing Benefit review team to the next face to face meeting.

AP May 02 2015: The action point was cleared.

AP May 03 2015: The Abolition of Assessed Income Periods project will be invited to attend the next face to face Steering Group.

AP May 04 2015: The action point was cleared.

3. Removal of automatic entitlement to housing support for new claims in Universal Credit from 18 – 21 year olds who are out of work

DWP explained that the measure will be introduced in April 2017, and will not impact on HB. The measure will affect those with entitlement to the housing element in Universal Credit (UC). DWP will be looking at exemptions as the intention is to ensure that vulnerable young people who are in need of support for their housing needs continue to receive it.

POG pointed out that claimants living in hostels and then moving into private rented accommodation will be a key area.

A note for LAs will be included in a General Information Bulletin.

4. Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)

Implementation:

- Up to and including 1 July 2015 227 LAs have gone live.
- 572 LA staff have been transferred to DWP.
- A further 17 LAs will go live from 3 August 2015.

Joint Working Group:

- Piloting in conjunction with DCLG and LAs around Local Council Tax Schemes is in its early stages.

POG members asked whether the pilots would include Scottish and Welsh LAs.

Service Provision:

- The Service Provision process and Service Level Agreement (SLA) review has now concluded.

POG members emphasised that they are keen to work with DWP to ensure success. They referred to a previously raised issue around feedback to LAs on referrals where a decision is made not to investigate.

On the issue of feedback on referrals made to SFIS POG members asked whether Management Information (MI) will be produced.

DWP advised the meeting of the positive feedback he had received from LAs visited. POG members reiterated their view that feedback on referrals is a key issue.

5. Local Authority Data Share Update

Pension Service Computer System (PSCS) Uprating:

- The PSCS uprating failed in December 2014 due to the size of the files.
- The solution developed has proved too costly to represent value for money, and consequently ATLAS will probably not supply this this year.

Message Hub:

- This will replace the Data Transfer Appliances (DTAs).
- The contract with the supplier has been signed and will be delivered using agile methodology. The majority of the work for the rebuild will be completed by mid-August.
- Roll out using a big bang approach is planned for November 2015.
- There will not be dual running in LAs.
- Decommissioning existing DTAs will probably take place end December/early January 2016.
- LAs will be notified through a combination of Glass Cubes, HB Direct and/or the General Bulletin.

New State Pension:

- An additional 5 data items are being tested.
- On track for delivery in September 2015 to tie in with other releases across the Department.
- The first evidence gather for claims will take place in December 2015, and the first payments will be made in April 2016.

Payment Deduction Programme (PDP):

- PDP has commissioned LADS to bring HB debt from LAs into DWP for recovery from UC.
- Detailed Business Requirements (DBR) for LA IT suppliers are planned for mid-August, with a series of workshops to follow, with implementation planned for April 2016.

The LAAs asked to see the DBR once it is finalised.

UC Data to Support LCTS:

- Planned to go live in April 2016, LADS is currently working with Local eGovernment Standards Body (LeGSB), UC and LA IT suppliers.
- DBRs have been prepared and are awaiting sign-off from UC.

POG asked about possible extensions to the tactical solutions in live service.

POG commented on the curtailed testing period. DWP confirmed that LADS is liaising with the LA IT software suppliers.

6. Impact on HB of the Marriage Allowance

DWP gave the meeting a background into the changes to the Marriage Allowance, explaining what the changes comprised and their impact on JSA. He added that a recent teleconference was held with stakeholders including LAs, and it was agreed that these changes would have no impact on HB. POG members asked for clarification around the self-employed and to further update to POG.

With regard to Scottish Rate of Income Tax (SRIT), an item will be included in the General Information Bulletin.

7. Benefit Cap

DWP updated the meeting following the announcement in the July budget of the reductions to the benefit cap.

- There will be 2 thresholds, one for Greater London and one for elsewhere.
- The changes will be implemented through UC live service and Digital as it rolls out.
- The design work will be shared with POG as it was for the implementation of the first benefit cap.
- There has been no announcement on the date for implementation.
- DWP is aware of LA planning requirements and LAs will be informed of estimated caseloads as soon as they are known.

POG requested caseload information per LA as soon as possible.

POG also asked to see the implementation plan as soon as possible.

POG members asked for clarification on whether the cap will be applied to where the claimant lives or where they have been placed by the LA.

It was agreed that benefit cap will be a standing item at future meetings of POG.

8. July Budget

DWP outlined some of the key announcements in the July budget.

- Most working age benefits will be frozen for the next 4 years.
- Changes to backdating bringing this into alignment with other DWP benefits, will be introduced in April 2016.
- For Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), specific allocations for each year of the Spending Review will allow longer term planning for LAs.
- Housing Policy Division will carry out a review of DHPs, looking at the need to address over and under spends.
- The Family Premium will be removed.

POG outlined some of the potential consequences of the changes to backdating and the use of 'Good Cause'. DWP advised that this issue will form part of the consultation. POG added that the removal of the Family Premium could mean changes to DCLG Prescribed Regulations. DWP advised that discussions with DCLG are ongoing.

POG also asked about the use of Market Rents and how this could potentially bring higher earners into HB.

9. AOB

POG raised an issue around the quality of ATLAS files and how the validation tool is creating extra work for LAs. DWP explained that the validation tool is working within expected parameters, and root problems will be addressed on 7 August. DWP added that LADs has little control over when batches are run, particularly if other items are delayed.

POG raised a concern around Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Schemes thresholds. It was agreed to invite a FERIS analyst to attend the next face to face meeting.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 30 September; Caxton House Room 6.03. 10.30 – 12.30.

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