



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: Practitioners' Operational Group (POG)

Date: 26 July 2016

Location: Caxton House Room 6.03

Attendees: DWP: Adrian Shooter (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Paul Moad, Andrew Hibble, Michelle Heath, Babu Ganatra

Dial-in: Malcolm Eadie, Pamela Thompson, Rachel Brown (HMRC)

LAAs: Paul Ellary, June Deans, Mark Gillmore, Frankie Cartwright, Chris Boylett

Dial-in: Pamela Richardson, Jean Cheeseman, Matthew Evans, Tricia Smith

Apologies: Les Robertson, Gwyn Thomas, Sian Peters, Karl Thomas, Colin Wallbank, 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 dialing in.

Matters Arising

Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

POG members referred to the item on the UC MGP1 (stop notice) and asked for an update on product testing with stakeholders including LAs.

POG members also referred to the item on Housing Benefit Matching Service Capital Rules and asked when the rules would be transferred to Fraud and Error Service (FES).

2. HMRC: (DL84TS Child Benefit Entitlement Letters)

HMRC explained that it has received a significant increase in the volume of calls requesting Child Benefit Entitlement letters.

HMRC advised the meeting that research into a number of LA websites has shown reference to this letter listed as an item of evidence required.

POG members explained that their remit allows them to influence LA benefit sections but not the wider areas of LA business such as Social Services or Free School Meals.

In discussion it was agreed that documents such as bank statements show Child Benefit in payment, and the amount. It was also agreed that that the DL84TS is one of many items of evidence, not the sole one.

A suggested approach to resolving this issue was for HMRC to consult with LAs on a proposal to stop re-issuing the Child Benefit Entitlement Letter.

POG members felt that most LA web sites clearly state that the original benefit entitlement letter can be used as evidence and do not encourage claimants to request copies from HMRC.

3. HB Review/Performance Management

DWP referred POG to the March meeting at which a small pilot was announced to trial electronic Local Authority (LA) print transfer.

DWP set out:

- details of the trial exercise
- findings from the trial
- next steps, including POG's agreement to implement the change nationally.

DWP explained that implementation is planned for October 2016 and will run with contingency arrangements.

POG members pointed out that the current scheme is working well. DWP explained that capacity issues within Performance Management is one of the drivers for this proposed change, and that the LAs in the pilot found that the arrangements worked more effectively.

DWP explained the technical process for the use of zip files from LA DIP systems, and added that no additional software will be required and the Single Points of Contact will be responsible for upskilling LA staff.

DWP pointed out that the technical details need further clarification, and that communications need to emphasise flexibility regarding data transfer and the positive feedback from the trials, especially from the large LAs.

POG members expressed a preference for dual running of the electronic and clerical process for a year to facilitate those LAs wishing to retain the clerical process. DWP reiterated the position around capacity for visiting officers. The importance of flexibility was agreed.

Draft guidance will be issued to POG for their comments.

Challenges

DWP responded to a previous action point around challenges.

For the last 6 months:

- from 5000 cases none had gone to arbitration
- 50 cases had been subject to challenge, with 16 upheld
- Real Time Information (RTI) cases had been reviewed for the first time, and the error trend concerned average income and attribution of earnings.

4. Wider Use of RTI (WuRTI)

DWP set out:

- the current position
- the position in DWP in respect of Pension Credit, Carers Allowance and working age benefits
- the alerts service and how WuRTI will work through any requirements and impacts with POG
- the current position in LAs; DWP is currently awaiting a response from DCLG in respect of Local Council Tax Reduction (LCTR)
- the next steps and the background to RTI and the use of Agile methodology
- the aim of WuRTI and the 2 key objectives; increasing the accuracy of new claims and maintaining correct payments for the lifecycle of the claim.

DWP explained that WuRTI is part of its strategy and LAs cannot opt out. It was agreed that any possible New Burdens should be discussed at the September Steering Group meeting.

POG members were concerned about the increase in volume, particularly around low value high frequency changes in circumstances.

POG agreed that testing the alert service with the pilot sites will be a key area for success.

DWP pointed out that WuRTI will afford the opportunity for LAs to rethink processes around earnings and how they can adopt a more proactive approach.

5. Payment Deductions Programme (PDP)

Debt Recovery in UC

DWP set out:

- UC policy in respect of debt
- the priority order of deductions
- the risk to recovery levels
- analysis of debt recoveries.

With regard to the analytical activity to develop a forecast of the debt position over the next five years, DWP pointed out that there is need to capture LA behaviors, as it is in their powers to take their own action such as direct attachment to earnings, as they need to recover debt as speedily as possible.

PDP LA Interface

The meeting discussed the issues around the state of readiness of LAs and their software suppliers for the LA interface which will go live on 01 August. POG members asked whether a state of dual running with the existing clerical solution could run until LAs are ready, and full testing has been carried out.

DWP explained that there are no options for dual running as the clerical solution will close from 01 August. DWP acknowledged POG's concerns, adding that throughout August LAs can test the interface and referrals could be stockpiled until the interface is live.

DWP emphasised the need for early communications to all LAs to clarify the position from 01 August.

6. Debt Management SLA

DWP explained that the Debt Management Service Level Agreement (SLA) and POG comment sheet had been circulated to POG for their sign off.

POG members asked to see a fully amended version before they could sign it off.

7. AOB

POG members expressed concern that some policy changes had been introduced without adherence to the statutory time limit and requested that DWP should adhere to the agreed timings whenever possible.

Date of Next Meeting: The next POG will take place on 27 September 2016; Caxton House 10.30 – 12.30.

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