



Summary Minutes

Title of meeting: DWP Local Authority Associations (LAA) Steering Group

Date: 15 March 2017

Attendees: **DWP:** Clare Elliott (Chair), Mont Goldman (Secretariat), Adrian Shooter, Craig Smith,

Dial in: Hayley Johnson-Hurst, Andrew Hibble, Martin Little, Amanda Sowerby, Paul Selby, Fiona Mcleish, Alan Brown, Kay Bendell

DCLG: Mercy Adebisi

LAAs: Rose Doran, Lisa Hayward, Jennifer Wynter, Andrew Stevens, Paul Ellary,

Dial in: Alex Sewell, Peter Meehan, Howard Mason

Apologies: Matthew Evans, Chris Gibbs, Andrew Barbour, Colin Wallbank, Steve Carey

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 January meeting were agreed.

2. Updates:

Housing Policy Division (HPD) Overview

DWP highlighted the following key areas:

Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (RSRS):

- Amending regulations were laid on 02 March and will come into force from 01 April 2017
- The regulations are not retrospective
- Guidance has been issued to LAs

The LAAs referred to the impact on Council Tax Reduction Schemes (CTRS) and the Prescribed Regulations.

With regard to new burdens, DWP confirmed that that Housing Delivery Division's (HDD) bid for funding had been approved, and a circular will be issued to Practitioners' Operational Group (POG) for Quality Assurance (QA).

Limiting Support to 2 Children:

- The policy will come into force from 06 April 2017
- New burden funding has been secured for next year
- Some clerical intervention will be needed around obtaining the Child Tax Credit award notice.

Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI):

- SMI regulations are laid, and will come into force from April 2018
- Communications will be issued from June 2017.

Temporary Accommodation Management Fee 2017/18

- The circular will be issued to POG for QA.

HDD Overview

DWP advised that replacing the Employee Authentication Service (EAS) and the Debt Tracing Service are two of the main priorities in respect of the financial position for 2017/18.

DWP referred to the positive meeting with LA Chief Finance Officers. A further meeting is scheduled for the end of March.

DCLG – Administration Subsidy Final Allocations

DCLG explained that the Business Rates revaluation work had taken priority over local council tax support work at its Local Taxation Division.

The local council tax support final allocations will be put before the Minister responsible for local government finance for approval after clearance with the Finance Sub Committee. DCLG intends to pay Local Council Tax Support grants to councils at the end of April or early May.

UC

DWP updated the meeting on funding for UC Universal Support:

- From the LA grant funding statement, 200 returns have been received
- Analysts are working through the returns
- The aim is for most LAs to be signed up by the end of March 2017, although there have been some issues around postcodes.

- Thus far, approximately 190 LAs have signed up.

The LAAs asked for a regional breakdown. They added that there are particular issues around the level of funding for London LAs.

New Burden Funding

DWP explained that ideally, work towards a single funding settlement will continue. The LAAs agreed that the funding schedule issued in December was helpful.

The LAAs asked about the timescale for disaggregation of HB and Council Tax Reduction (CTR). DWP explained that a meeting with DCLG to discuss disaggregation for 2018/19 is planned for April 2017.

3. Right Benefit Initiative (RBI)

DWP set out:

- The background and current position, including the main differences between Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) and RBI
- What will be asked of LAs including estimated timings for reviewing earnings cases
- Optional Real Time Information (RTI), including improvements to functionality
- Increasing volume levels of Optional RTI
- Subsidy implications for Optional RTI
- The review process for self employed and irregular earnings cases
- The methodology for allocating RBI funding
- How LAs can opt in, how the funding will be monitored and how performance will be managed, including escalation routes.

With regard to estimated timings for reviewing earnings cases, particularly self employed cases, the LAAs pointed out that funding did not take LA activity, along with the entire customer journey sufficiently into account.

The LAAs referred to issues around the rankings for Optional RTI. DWP explained that HDD is working through several issues including rankings for Optional RTI, and that a solution will be in place as soon as possible.

The LAAs were also concerned that a definition for fluctuating earnings is needed. DWP explained that that an internal group including Performance Measurement would be looking at this, and that the Wider Use of Real Time Information (WURTI) test evaluation in April would also be relevant.

4. WURTI Update

DWP updated the meeting on the following key points:

Rollout:

- Letters to LAs, concerning the requirement for Single Points of Contact (SPOCS) were issued in February, and to date 290 SPOCS have been identified
- A readiness review has taken place, with a LAA Steering Group representative as part of the process

DWP explained that 2 issues had been identified.

- i) EAS: putting the contract in place for the Change Request has taken longer than anticipated and will impact on the schedule for rollout. In order to minimise the impact, the project proposed that the 6 test LAs will go live from April 2017, and to move those LAs scheduled for Tranche 1, including the London LAs to the end of the process. The Steering Group agreed this plan.
- ii) Business impact: the work study has identified potential areas of costs and savings. Further analysis is being carried out to identify system, process or policy changes to reduce the impact.

DWP added that an exercise will be carried out to quantify the evidence from the initial study with the 6 LAs, and once findings are available they will be shared with the Steering Group.

The LAAs asked for a timeline of when the work will be completed. DWP explained that the work must be completed by the autumn, before the Alerts are switched on. DWP confirmed that the Alerts will not be switched on until funding issues are resolved.

It was agreed that the overall solution must support the HB process.

5. Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) Funding

DWP explained the background to the new burdens funding once SFIS had been handed over to HDD as Business as Usual, and the new figure had been included in December's LA Funding Schedule.

DWP explained that from mid April HDD's Performance Development Team (PDT) will be carrying out a review of the SFIS end to end process. The review will include costings in its scope.

The LAAs pointed out that the issue was not necessarily the volume of cases, rather the complexities involved.

6. Standard Enquiry Facility (SEF) Modernisation

DWP explained that SEF is the technical term for the front end screens used by LAs. Staff who actually use it day to day just know it as Customer Information System (CIS).

DWP explained that the purpose of the presentation was to request approval to proceed with the initial rollout of Local Authority Users from North Tyneside LA.

DWP set out:

- The background to the project to modernise the CIS front end screens
- The modernisation story so far, including work with North Tyneside LA on the Alpha phase
- The communications and briefing for all staff at North Tyneside, and how staff will be supported and trained.

DWP went on to explain the difference between SEF modernisation, and CIS remediation.

The LAAs noted the presentation and were content for the project to proceed. They added that LA IT employees would need advance sight of the changes to their IT systems.

7. AOB

Engagement:

DWP explained that as part of an overall review of the engagement process, it has been recommended that the UC LA Steering Group and the LAA Steering Group should be merged. The meeting identified some of the key areas needing careful consideration:

- Maintenance of continuity
- Membership
- Avoiding duplication
- Maintaining the emphasis on partnership
- The forum should continue to be proactive

DWP added that this proposal will be put before the March meeting of POG to seek their view.

Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Carry Over

DWP explained that its position on DHP carry over remained unchanged.

The LAAs pointed out that the benefit freeze is causing issues for LAs. DWP explained that statistics show the debt stocks have stopped going up and it would be useful to get feedback on why this was.

Date of Next Meeting: The next full meeting of the LAA Steering Group will take place on 10 May 2017 in Caxton House room 2.29 starting at 11.00.

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