

Housing Benefit Direct issue 152 September 2014



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Editorial

It is hard to believe that it is September already. Where has the year gone? The long, dark evenings will be an opportunity for me to catch up on my reading. Insight magazine should provide some light relief from my current book (Crime and Punishment). No, I'm not implying any link!

Many thanks to our contributors this month, we are always pleased to consider inputs from our partners so if you have any news, innovation or good practice you think would be interesting to others, please get in touch.

Our first contribution is from the Money Advice Service with a request for local authority (LA) staff working directly with citizens to signpost them to a free on-line service to help them manage their debts, including information on where they might get advice locally.

We have an interesting update from Flintshire County Council on their experience of introducing Universal Credit locally. A number of areas of good practice are highlighted including training for staff, information for residents and regular engagement with local housing associations. Don't forget you can access the Universal Credit Partner toolkit on Gov.uk. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-for-local-authorities>

The Chartered Institute of Housing is conducting a survey on how social housing tenants are supported to move home, maybe in response to the removal of the spare room subsidy or to find employment. There is a link to the survey site within the article below.

Last month we trailed the suggestion of a series of workshops on subsidy claim qualifications. There seems to be a reasonable degree of interest in attending these so, in addition to the session in Blackpool on 10 September, we are considering additional workshops subject to interest. Details on dates and locations are included; please contact the team directly if you are interested.

Finally, we have an update on the Real Time Information bulk data match project. From 19th September, four LAs (Barrow, Gateshead, Liverpool and Kensington and Chelsea – one from each of the main IT suppliers) will participate in a test phase in which we hope to identify and resolve any issues in the end to end data share process. All going to plan, all LAs will then start to receive referrals on the 6th October. Guidance will be issued in advance.

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[Distribution enquiries](#)

Advisers asked to spread the word about free debt advice

The [Money Advice Service](#) (MAS) an independent service set up by the government to help people manage their money better, they provide a wealth of online information, where partners and claimants can access extra support material on how to budget. A new free on-line service has been launched to help people to manage their debts. The MAS [Debt Advice Locator](#) aims to give people access to free and impartial debt advice so that Jobcentre advisers and other organisations can now tell their clients about the service. Chief Executive, Caroline Rookes, said:

“If someone is struggling to pay day-to-day bills, or to keep up with loan repayments and other financial commitments, it can be hard to know where to turn for help. That’s why we’ve developed our [Debt Advice Locator](#) – which helps people find free, confidential and impartial debt advice near where they live or work. We know that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and local authority (LA) staff will often come into contact with people who need help with their finances and we are keen to work with you to make sure people get the help they need. We also fund debt advice projects across the country and work with our partners, including organisations such as Citizens Advice, to drive higher standards and ensure a more consistent service for people struggling with debt.”

Information is provided about partner organisations that can help, such as the National Debtline and StepChange Debt Charity, as well as telephone services which allow people to speak directly with an expert advisor. Most importantly the face-to-face debt advice search tool allows you to type in your location and find local organisations that give free advice on managing finances and dealing with debt.

Real Time Information, Bulk Data Match Project

DWP is carrying out an exercise matching HM Revenues & Customs Real Time Information (RTI) (earnings and non-State Pension data) against data held on six social security benefits including Housing Benefit (HB) to identify cases where claimants have either failed to declare or have under declared earnings and non-state pension. This initiative will generate 223,000 HB only referrals that will be issued to LA’s over a number of monthly tranches. The first tranche will be available from 19 September 2014 however, this will not, initially, be issued to all LAs.

Four LAs (Barrow, Gateshead, Liverpool, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea) have volunteered to take the data on the 19 September 2014 to test the LA IT supplier’s software as well as to provide an opportunity for the LAs to use the data to assess the quality and test the end to end process. During this test phase there will be regular calls to ensure that any issues identified are addressed promptly. Following a series of fixes on the DWP side we are not anticipating any major issues, but the testing will prove whether this assumption is correct.

Providing that no major issues are identified during this testing phase we intend to issue referrals to all LAs on the 6 October 2014, guidance will be issued to all LAs in advance of this national roll-out.

If you have any queries about RTI please contact: Lesley Gordon/Dawn Singer rti.portfolio@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Flintshire County Council

Flintshire County Council has been working hard to help Universal Credit claimants make the transition onto the new benefit.

Universal Credit is a new service that supports people who are on a low income or out of work, and helps insure they are better off in work than on benefits. Shotton Jobcentre has been delivering Universal Credit since 7 April 2014 and is supported by Flintshire County Council to ensure claimants receive the support they need.

Paul Neave from the Council's Community Support Services explains how Council staff prepared for Universal Credit: "We wanted to make sure our staff had the necessary skills and knowledge to explain Universal Credit to Flintshire residents and to be able to refer them to relevant support services depending on what extra help they might need. We ran training sessions on Universal Credit for our frontline staff which has really boosted people's confidence to respond to queries about Universal Credit. We are now working with Shotton Jobcentre colleagues to develop further training sessions for colleagues who need a more in depth knowledge of the benefit."

Flintshire County Council has also found effective ways of keeping its residents informed about Universal Credit, for instance by placing leaflets and information in housing newsletters, in libraries and in the reception areas of council buildings.

One important change that Universal Credit introduces is the requirement for HB recipients to pay their rent directly to their landlord rather than it being paid automatically. Monthly payments align claimants with the world of work and remove the barriers to finding a job. The Council is working closely with the area's local housing services to ensure tenants have the support they need to help them make this transition.

Paul explains, "We meet regularly with our local housing association partners to update them on how Universal Credit is working in Flintshire and make sure our residents have the support they need, including helping them to get to know their tenants better.

"Working closely with voluntary and third sector services is key to our success in providing support for Universal Credit locally. We've got some really strong local partnerships in Flintshire and offer training to our colleagues in these organisations to make sure we can all provide the best possible support to Universal Credit claimants on the ground."

Don't forget you can access the Universal Credit Partner toolkit on Gov.uk. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/universal-credit-for-local-authorities>

DWP - Local Authority Subsidy Workshops

[August's HB Direct](#) requested expressions of interest in workshops at which the issues leading to subsidy claim qualifications are discussed and the means of addressing these issues identified. The first workshop will be held in Blackpool on 10 September 2014.

Given the positive response to the request for expressions of interest, we are considering holding the following additional workshops:

- London 16 October 2014
- Leeds 24 October 2014
- Birmingham 30 October 2014
- Cardiff 13 November 2014
- Edinburgh 20 November 2014

As before, it will be important for the success of the workshops that a range of LAs attend, i.e. those which are qualified annually, to those which have made improvements in the level of qualification, to those which are not qualified.

The holding of all five regional workshops will, of course, depend upon sufficient expressions of interest being shown in each. Any LAs wishing to attend one of the above workshops or obtain further information should contact Michael Mina using the email address below michael.mina@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) – housing mobility survey 2014

The introduction of the removal of the spare room subsidy has led to a greater number of landlords focusing on how they can support their tenants to move. Many landlords have used the flexibilities of the Localism Act 2011 to award priority to affected tenants to allow them to downsize into smaller properties. These flexibilities can also be used to support wider tenant aspirations such as supporting tenants to move to take up employment opportunities.

Through the housing mobility survey 2014 the CIH wishes to explore how your organisation supports **existing** social housing tenants to move. The results from the survey will inform future pieces of CIH work to promote good practice around mobility.

The survey, which should take no longer than ten minutes to complete can be [completed here](#) and will close at **5pm on Friday 12 September**. If you need any further information please contact Charlotte.Smith@cih.org