

Housing Benefit Direct issue 167 May 2016



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Editorial

Welcome to May's Housing Benefit (HB) Direct. The publication of this edition has been delayed slightly due to Purdah and to enable us to include information on the benefit cap which is scheduled to be implemented in the autumn.

We published the HB Speed of Processing and Caseload Management Information for quarter 3 on 27 April 2016. The information shows that speed of processing has improved by 1 day for both new claims and changes of circumstance and Caseload Management Information remained stable at 72%. Considering the competing priorities, welfare reforms and pressure you are under to reduce costs and deliver efficiencies this is a significant achievement.

There are a couple of reminders in this edition to encourage you to complete the Discretionary Housing Payment return by 13 May 2016 and supply details of delegates for the local authority (LA) workshops we are setting on HB Fraud and Error (HB F&E). The workshops are designed to enable LAs to share good practice and experiences regarding their Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS) plans in terms of what has worked well and what hasn't and explore what more we can do to work together to reduce HB F&E going forward. More information is included in the link to the bulletin in the article.

The 2016/17 FERIS scheme was launched on 11 February 2016 and I would like to thank all LAs who submitted their maintenance fund applications promptly by the 29 February deadline. All maintenance fund applications were evaluated and approved before the end of the financial year amounting to nearly £12.5m being paid to LAs. The latest FERIS figures indicate that performance has improved in January 2017 compared to quarter 3 performance, with an average 3.6% improvement against baseline across all LAs. The national F&E statistics are due to be published on 19 May for the first 6 months of 2015/16 and I'm sure that the additional activities LAs have been undertaking to identify and correct HB errors through FERIS and Real Time Information will be reflected in the figures - fingers crossed.

We are currently working with Universal Credit colleagues to discuss the methodology for apportioning the 2017/18 HB Admin Subsidy to take account of Universal Credit rollout and we are also working with Public Sector Audit Appointment to develop the HB subsidy audit arrangements for 2017/18; the current arrangements coming to an end on 31 March 2017. More information on both these topics will be presented to LA Associations Steering Group and appear in articles in this publication in the near future.

Thank you for your continued readership.

Adrian Shooter

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Benefit cap changes – Process for receiving LA scans

In Bulletin [HB G2/2016](#) and the March issue of [HB Direct](#) we requested details of PGP key holders and nominations for LA Single Point of Contacts (SPoCs) to receive scans that contain details of your HB customers who have the potential to be impacted by the changes to the benefit cap levels currently planned for introduction in autumn 2016.

We now have details of all PGP key holders and/or SPoCs for all LAs.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will produce the scans and send by PGP an encrypted email (using the Public Key files for the PGP key holders) or by a password protected email to those without PGP. The scans will be sent between 9 and 13 May 2016 inclusive.

The scans will provide an indication of the number of households likely to be impacted at the time they are drawn. The initial numbers on the scan may be higher than the numbers that go on to be capped, because of changes in circumstances such as new claims to exempt benefits, moving into work, becoming eligible for Working Tax Credits, etc.

Instructions will be sent with the scans. The instructions explain:

- that it is the LA's role to check they have received and can open the scans
- for those without PGP, how to obtain a password from DWP
- who to contact if there are problems opening the scan
- who to contact if there are any questions on the actual content of the scans.

An aide memoire will also accompany the scans; it will explain the scan information.

You should not use the scan data to contact any customers ahead of notifications going out from 24 May 2016 onwards. Contacting customers before they have been notified could be confusing for customers.

If you have any queries regarding this article please email the Benefit Cap Changes Project at caroline.a.mcdermott@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Universal Credit

The benefit cap scans referred to above **do not** include details of Universal Credit claimants. As there are no data sharing powers to allow DWP to do so, DWP cannot provide LAs with a list of Universal Credit claimants who may be impacted by the benefit cap.

Claimants in receipt of Universal Credit who are likely to be impacted by the changes to the benefit cap will be notified by DWP and be able to discuss help and support with their work coach. This support offer includes signposting claimants to their LA for budgeting and housing assistance.

HB Speed of Processing Statistics

On 27 April 2016 we published HB Speed of Processing statistics and associated data for the period October to December 2015.

New claims

- These latest statistics show that the average time taken to process new HB claims in Q3 of 2015/16 was 21 days; on average this is 1 day lower than in the same quarter of 2014/15
- For Q3 there were 316,000 new HB claims, this represents a decrease of 14,000 (4%) since the last quarter and a decrease of 30,000 (9%) since Q3 of 2014/15.

Change of circumstance

- The average time taken to process change of circumstance on existing HB claims in Q3 of 2015/16 was 10 days; on average this is 1 calendar day lower than in the same quarter of 2014/15
- For Q3 there were 2.60 million changes of circumstance to HB claims. This is a decrease of 18,000 (0.7%) cases from Q3 of 2014/15.

National Speed of Processing performance continues to remain steady at just over 20 days for new claims and around 10 days for changes of circumstance (excluding year-end months/quarters) which normally show much lower times for changes because of bulk processing of benefit uprating and rent increases. However, the 21 day average for new claims in quarter 3 of 2015/16 is the best-ever national performance.

Full details can be found on GOV.UK

Caseload Management Information

At the same time we also published (experimental) Official Statistics on the estimated value of reductions to weekly HB entitlement achieved at LA level, compared to the expected level.

- The total value of reductions to weekly HB entitlement in Q3 of 2015/16 was £40.6 million, compared with £44.2 million for Q2 of 2015/16
- The total value of expected reductions to weekly HB entitlement in quarter 3 of 2015/16 was £56.4 million, compared with £61.4 million for Q2 of 2015/16

The drop in the total value of reductions achieved is largely due to seasonal affects, with less activity occurring over the Christmas and New Year periods. This is reflected in the lower level of expected reductions for this period. As a result, in Q3 2015/16, LAs achieved around 72% of the total value of estimated expected reductions. This remains unchanged from Q2 2015/16.

Full details of can be found on GOV.UK

Discretionary Housing Payments monitoring returns 2015/16 – A reminder

Thank you to all those LAs who have already provided their annual Discretionary Housing Payment monitoring return for the April 2015 to March 2016 period. The Department values your input and continues to find this information very useful. For authorities who have yet to send in a return, we would be grateful if you could send them to dhp.monitoringinbox@dwp.gsi.gov.uk by Friday 13 May 2016.

Further information and the returns form can be found in Bulletin [HB G4/2016](#).

HB Fraud and Error good practice workshops

We announced in Bulletin [HB G4/2016](#) the venues and dates for each LA's workshop. We requested LAs to provide details of delegates for those workshops. There are still plenty of places available, so if you have not confirmed your attendance yet, please email confirmation and delegates names to hamish.j.robertson@dwp.gsi.gov.uk by 27 May 2016.

Update on the Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme 2

We are pleased to report the very successful launch of the newly designed FERIS 2. Launch letters and 2016/17 maintenance fund application forms were issued to LAs on 11 February 2016. The deadline for applications was 29 February 2016 to enable them to be processed by the end of March 2016. The first application was received on Friday 12 February and in total 337 authorities submitted applications. The Housing Delivery Division's Performance Development Team consultants offered support to all authorities to assist them with their individual requests. All applications received were assessed and agreed by a Decision Making Forum and a total of £12,413,755.58 was paid out.

If you have any queries regarding the above information, please contact the FERIS Team at FERIS.TEAM@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK