

Guidance

# LA Welfare Direct 8/2023

Updated 8 August 2023

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# Contact

If you have queries about the:

- technical content of this bulletin then contact details are given at the end of each article
- general content and distribution of this bulletin, contact: [lawelfare.correspondence@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:lawelfare.correspondence@dwp.gov.uk)

# Who should read

All Housing Benefit staff

# Action

For information

# Editorial

You'll also see mention of the expansion of Move to Universal Credit rollout. Although this is focussed on Tax Credit only claimants at present, I'm sure you are keen to know what is happening

February was the last time I provided the editorial for the LAWD and a lot has happened since then. In that edition I reflected on attending the excellent workshops on Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) and Housing Benefit Award Accuracy (HBAA). You'll see in this edition that we have now provided updated frequently asked questions for both (directly to local authorities) incorporating questions that came out of those workshops.

We are also progressing the 12-month plus view of data solution for VEP for an autumn release to further help you deliver and keep claims correct.

In February, I also mentioned the imminent launch of both VEP and the HBAA Initiative for this year and we are now part way through quarter 2. Looking at the performance management information so far it looks as though you are doing a brilliant job in delivering against our ask, so thank you once again for all your efforts.

That thanks also extends to your management of HB new claims and change of circumstances as the latest published statistics (highlighted within) show performance is being maintained for new claims and improving for change of circumstance.

in the financial year ending March 2025. We are working on communication plans for that so we can provide you with the right information at the right time for your own planning purposes.

I hope you all manage to get a break over the summer and wish you all the best for the remainder of the year.

Darren Baker

Head of Change & Communications, Fraud, Error & Debt Team

Local Authority Partnership, Engagement and Delivery division

## **Local Council Tax Reduction interest setting on Searchlight**

1. A small number of local authorities (LAs) have raised an issue with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) relating to how the Universal Credit (UC) Local Council Tax Reduction (LCTR) data share works in interaction with the specific design of their LCTR scheme design.

### **The issue**

2. In DWP Operations, the UC new claim process includes a question about applying for, or intending to apply for LCTR, and this is what sets the interest on Searchlight.

2. Where a UC claim ends, for some LAs, this also results in an end to the LCTR claim and, therefore, an automatic end to the LCTR interest on Searchlight.

4. If the claimant then restarts UC at a later date within a 6-month period, they don't go through the full UC application process and there is then no question for them to indicate that they intend to reapply for LCTR. So, the LCTR interest is not automatically re-set on Searchlight.

5. The implications for some LAs are that they treat new UC claims as an application for LCTR but because they don't receive re-application notifications (within that 6-month window) they wouldn't know about them and, therefore, wouldn't know to re-start LCTR payments.

6. DWP recognises this is an issue for some LAs as it depends on how each LA has designed their LCTR scheme and whether or not a claim (or reclaim) for UC is an automatic trigger for LCTR eligibility.

7. From the point Council Tax Benefit was replaced by LCTR in 2013, DWP has done its very best to share data to support LAs in their administration of LCTR. However, we can only have one national data share, designed in a way that supports all LAs. Unfortunately, we cannot share data in 350 different ways for 350 LCTR scheme designs.

### **Tactical solution**

8. We are looking into a potential long-term technical solution that attempts to consider all LCTR scheme designs but, as yet, we do not know if it is feasible. However, as a tactical solution, we are allowing LAs to manually re-set the LCTR interest on Searchlight, if necessary, for a maximum of 5 months after a UC claim ends. After that 6 months, LAs must unset the interest, to prevent unnecessary sharing of data.

9. Although some LAs may already be doing this, this communication formally legitimises such processes.

10. If you have any questions, please contact [lawelfare.lasupport@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:lawelfare.lasupport@dwp.gov.uk)

## **Additional method for communicating with Employee Authentication Service users**

11. DWP will begin using the GOV.UK Notify service in August 2023 to send email communications directly to Employee Authentication Service (EAS) users by using email addresses held on EAS accounts.

12. DWP is adding this new method of direct communication as we are aware that the usual methods of communication do not always reach all EAS users timeously. Directly emailing with appropriate communications will minimise any delay and disruption to both DWP and LAs.

13. The communications will be short messages, such as deadline reminders to OAs (Organisation Administrators) SAMs (Service Access Managers), reminders of when DWP systems are planned to go down and updates around any temporary issues with DWP systems for example.

14. These emails will appear as usual DWP correspondence (sent from a trusted DWP email address) with the ability for the recipient to send a direct reply.

15. Please note the GOV.UK Notify method of email communication will not replace the usual DWP methods of communicating with LAs via the single inbox process. This is simply an additional method to send urgent communications directly to EAS users only.

16. If you have any questions regarding this article, contact [lawelfare.lasecurity@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:lawelfare.lasecurity@dwp.gov.uk)

## **Updated versions of the Verify Earnings and Pensions guidance and frequently asked questions**

17. The Verify Earnings and Pensions guidance (VEP) and the frequently asked questions (FAQs) have been updated to reflect recent changes (including the new

UC outcome note), as well as responding to various questions raised by LA colleagues during the recent engagement events.

18. These updated documents were shared with all LAs on 27 July 2023 via LAs' single inboxes and are also available to view on Glasscubes.

## **Updated version of the Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Initiative FAQs**

19. The Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Initiative FAQs have been updated. Some of the changes incorporated originated from questions asked by LA colleagues at during the recent engagement events.

20. The updated FAQs were shared with all LAs on 27 July 2023 via LAs' single inboxes and are also available to view on Glasscubes.

## **VEP service to provide more than 12 months' worth of data**

21. Following feedback from LAs when completing the yearly LA customer feedback survey about DWP's data sharing and data security, we have been exploring the option of providing LAs with more than 12 months' worth of earnings and pension data using the VEP service, for which we are now able to report positive progress.

22. Development of the change has been going well and plans are now in place to release this for LAs in early autumn 2023. Once development is finalised and the actual delivery date is known we will issue further communications and guidance so LAs are informed of what to expect.

23. We are sure LAs will be pleased by this news and look forward to updating you with the delivery details.

24. In the meantime, if you have any questions regarding this article do contact [Darryl.Chesters@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:Darryl.Chesters@dwp.gov.uk)

## **Invitation to the next Data sharing and IT consultation and engagement forum**

25. The next forum will be held on **Tuesday 15 August 2023** from **3pm to 4pm**.

### **Joining instructions**

26. The joining instructions are:

- The MS Teams link to this meeting has been shared in the version of the LAWD8/2023 that was sent directly to each LA's single inbox.
- **note:** It is more difficult to ask questions through dial-in so, if you anticipate having questions, we recommend joining through MS Teams where possible.
- aim to join the event 2 or 3 minutes before the start time, as we intend to start promptly.
- speakers will be muted by default but instructions will be given during the event if you want to ask a question.

## Forum agenda

- A 15-minute introduction from DWP, covering projects recently delivered, projects currently in delivery, insight into future planned projects, as well as the most recent common issues that have been reported to us.
- 30 to 45 minutes of questions from LAs on the call about the projects and matters covered in the introduction and any other IT and data sharing questions and issues LAs may have.
- If time allows, 15 minutes focused on suggestions from LAs about future data sharing, data matching or automation projects that DWP could consider funding and delivering.

27. The call will be recorded and the recording will be published on Glasscubes.

28. The forum is open to all LAs and it would be beneficial for every LA to have at least one representative dial in to help us maximise feedback. Each LA representative should:

- seek input and feedback from as many of their colleagues as possible prior to dialling in, for example, questions they might want answering
- have high level knowledge about data sharing, data matching and current IT topic areas
- feedback to their colleagues about how the conference call went, including the answers to the questions we asked.

29. We look forward to your participation on the call. However, if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact [paul.selby@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:paul.selby@dwp.gov.uk)

## Publication of HB speed of processing statistics for January to March 2023

30. The department [published \(https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/housing-benefit-statistics-on-speed-of-processing-for-2022-to-2023/statistical-release-january-to-march-2023-quarter-4-financial-year-2022-to-2023\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/housing-benefit-statistics-on-speed-of-processing-for-2022-to-2023/statistical-release-january-to-march-2023-quarter-4-financial-year-2022-to-2023) HB speed of processing statistics and associated data for quarter 4 (Q4) on Wednesday 26 July 2023.

## Some key points



31. During Q4 of financial year ending (FYE) March 2023 there were 99,000 new HB claims and 3.4 million changes of circumstances to existing HB claims processed in Great Britain (GB).

32. For new HB claims, this is an increase of 7,700 (8%) since last quarter, and an increase of 11,000 (12%) when compared to a year earlier.

33. For change of circumstances to existing HB claims, this is an increase of 2.4 million (247%) since last quarter and a decrease of 110,000 (3%) when compared to a year earlier.

## **New claims**

- The average time taken to process a new HB claim during the latest quarter was 20 calendar days. This is the same as last quarter and a year earlier.

## **Change of circumstances**

- The average number of days taken to process a change of circumstance to an existing HB claim during the latest quarter was 3 calendar days. This is 5 days lower than last quarter and the same as a year earlier.

## **To note**

34. The following LAs have been omitted this quarter due to data concerns:

- HB speed of processing statistics do not include figures for Gloucester LA because of a cyber-attack suffered by the LA impacting data provision. Therefore, speed of processing figures for Gloucester will be omitted in line with our standard approach for handling missing data or data with quality concerns. Analysis for Gloucester using historical data shows that the GB and regional (South West) level speed of processing figures are not impacted by the omission of Gloucester data. Volumes of both types of HB claims are likely to be affected by less than 1% at GB level and around 4% at regional (South West) level.
- Hackney LA have now resumed the supply of HB speed of processing data to DWP. Their data is included within this release but because recovery work in Hackney is ongoing, speed of processing figures are still likely to be impacted.

## **Practitioners' Operational Group and LA Welfare Steering Group**

35. The last LA Welfare Steering Group meeting took place on 20 July 2023. Agenda items included the LA Welfare issues Highlight Report, Move to UC and LA funding.

36. Both groups' meetings are held bi-monthly (and alternately). However, the next Practitioners' Operational Group scheduled in August 2023 has been cancelled so

the next meeting will be the LA Welfare Steering Group on 21 September 2023.

37. If you have any questions regarding topics raised at these consultation groups, you can email [lawelfare.correspondence@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:lawelfare.correspondence@dwp.gov.uk).

## **New Conversational Platform on UC telephony**

38. DWP is introducing a new technology called Conversational Platform into the UC telephony channel which will allow the department to be more efficient in providing information and assistance to support customers calling UC.

39. It will transform the customer journey by replacing traditional Interactive Voice Response call journeys (in other words, press 1 for X, 2 for Y) with a voice led solution which will interact with customers in a way that mimics human conversation.

40. The DWP Virtual Agent will ask the customer why they are calling today. The technology will listen to the customers response and will use automatic speech recognition and natural language understanding to identify what the customer is saying.

41. Once the DWP Virtual Agent understands what was said, it will personalise the customer's journey and determine next steps and form a response, providing self-serve answers to straightforward enquiries. Where a further conversation with someone is required, the call will be routed through to a telephony agent.

42. The primary goal is to improve the customer experience.

43. Conversational Platform, through the DWP Virtual Agent, will allow our customers to speak naturally, securing better insight into why the customer is calling and enabling how best to respond to their enquiry.

44. It will be able to save customers the time they normally spend waiting to speak to someone, by providing self-serve directions to certain simple enquiries, thereby reducing call demand to agents. Where a further conversation with a person is required, Conversational Platform will help route to the right person first time.

45. If, at any point during their interaction with the DWP Virtual Agent, the customer asks to speak to a person, indicates they are vulnerable or notifies they are a phone claim, they will be taken out of Conversational Platform and routed to a telephony agent. We have also added limits on the number of error messages a customer can experience, or the number of times information can be repeated, meaning a customer will not become trapped in Conversational Platform. So, if it's not working for them, we will route them to a telephony agent.

46. We plan to deliver Conversational Platform in UC in late September 2023 across 3 phases:

- **Phase 1:** will be to introduce a Minimum Viable Product. Customers will interact with the DWP Virtual Agent and be able to self-serve answers to certain queries, with other queries routed to our Outsourcing Delivery Partner. Following deployment, there will be a period of Test & Learn for about 3 months to improve the platform as necessary.
- **Phase 2:** will be to **scale the Conversational Platform service** by introduction of new opportunities for customers to self-serve, as well as exploiting opportunities to route calls to different destinations to enable a more proficient service.
- **Phase 3:** will be to enhance the service, continuously improving it, as well as introducing new product features.

## Latest update: Move to UC

47. In July 2023, DWP continued with the Move to UC expansion; moving into Kent, North London, Durham & Tees Valley and East Anglia.

48. In August, we further expanded into West Yorkshire, Staffordshire & Derbyshire, West Scotland, and South London. This will be followed by Cumbria and Lancashire, Essex, Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Southwest Wales, East Scotland, and Lincolnshire Nottinghamshire & Rutland in September 2023.

49. We continue with our small-scale discovery phase with Tax Credit couples, learning and adapting to ensure couples can make a claim to UC effectively, before we increase numbers later this year.

50. From September, we are planning to include other legacy benefit combinations in our discovery work to support our preparation for moving households on different legacy combinations at scale in the FYE ending March 2025.

51. Furthermore, building on the positive reception of January's publication [Learning from the Discovery Phase](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/completing-the-move-to-universal-credit-learning-from-the-discovery-phase) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/completing-the-move-to-universal-credit-learning-from-the-discovery-phase>) which outlined our learnings from the 'Earliest Testable Service' cohort (the first 500 Migration Notices issued in Bolton and Medway), we have been working with Ministers on the content and timing of future publications. We will be publishing data on our Move to UC progress in August.

52. For ease of reference, below is a chronology of the Move to UC areas:

### Discovery sites

- Bolton
- Cornwall
- London Borough of Harrow
- Medway

- Northumberland

## **Expansion quarter 1 sites (April to June 2023)**

- Avon
- Cheshire
- East London
- Gloucester
- Greater Manchester
- Northeast Yorkshire & Humber
- Somerset

## **Expansion quarter 2 sites (July to September 2023)**

- Cumbria and Lancashire
- Dorset Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight
- Durham and Tees Valley
- East Anglia
- East Scotland
- Essex
- Kent
- Lincolnshire Nottinghamshire & Rutland
- North London
- South London
- Southwest Wales
- Staffordshire & Derbyshire
- West Scotland
- West Yorkshire

## **Impact of digitalisation on DWP services**

53. DWP is looking to explore the potential impact of digitisation on its services and one strand of this exploration is about how the take-up of benefits may be affected by digitisation. We are aiming to create a broad evidence base and would like to test whether the digitisation of LCTR can provide any evidence. To that end, we have developed a short survey for LAs to complete to help us assess whether digitisation has had an impact on the take-up of LCTR which we will send directly to Revenue and Benefits managers next week.

54. We have chosen to examine LCTR as it pre-dates the implementation of digitised claims. We plan to combine the returns from the survey with local caseload data to test whether digitisation had any impact on take-up.

55. We appreciate the time LAs will take to fill in this survey and look forward to the responses.

## HB decisions by the Upper Tribunal

56. Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) Leeds is not aware of any HB cases that have been decided by the Upper Tribunal (UT) since July's edition of this bulletin.

57. A selection of decisions of the UT are [published \(https://www.gov.uk/administrative-appeals-tribunal-decisions\)](https://www.gov.uk/administrative-appeals-tribunal-decisions) on their website. Do be aware that there is an undefined time lapse between decisions being issued and their appearance on the website.

58. If you have any queries about cases before the UT Judges or courts, please contact us by email at [quarryhouse.dmaleedscustomersupportservices@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:quarryhouse.dmaleedscustomersupportservices@dwp.gov.uk)

## New Legislation

59. There are no Statutory Instruments (SIs) to list since July's edition of this bulletin.

60. Copies of SIs can now be downloaded from [legislation.gov.uk \(http://www.legislation.gov.uk/\)](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)

## What's new on our HB pages on [www.gov.uk \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-benefit-information-guidance-and-good-practice-for-local-authority-staff\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-benefit-information-guidance-and-good-practice-for-local-authority-staff)

61. The following items can be found on the website link shown:

Document	Subject	Link
LAWD7/2023 bulletin	Editorial Update: Transformation of the Single Housing Benefit, Extract returns using a real time Application Programme Interface, Update: Care Home Information Service, Update: Managed migration of Tax	<a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/la-welfare-direct-bulletins-2023/la-welfare-direct-72023">LAWD7/2023 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/la-welfare-direct-bulletins-2023/la-welfare-direct-72023)</a>

Document	Subject	Link
	Credit claimants to Universal Credit , Practitioners' Operational Group and LA Welfare Steering Group, Secondment opportunities in the Local Authority Partnership, Engagement and Delivery division's Performance Development Team, HB decisions by the Upper Tribunal, New Legislation, What's new on our HB pages on <a href="http://www.gov.uk">www.gov.uk</a>	

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