

**MINUTES OF THE JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING HELD  
VIRTUALLY ON 7 DECEMBER 2022 AT 10:30AM**

Marie Cavanagh		Chairperson
Kevin Higgins		Independent Member
Ursula O'Hare		Independent Member
Leonora McLaughlin	Member	Director of Pensions, Disability, Benefit Security and Debt
Julie Nelson	Member	Deputy Director, Benefit Security and Debt
Michelle Furphy (attending for Jacqui Montgomery)		Deputy Director Universal Credit Operations
Ann Meeke		Deputy Director Working Age Services
Peter Murchan		Internal Audit
Ros Agnew	Member	Deputy Director Child Maintenance Service
Christina Hart	Observer	Benefit Security Business Support
Bernie McVey	Minutes	Benefit Security Business Support

**1. Welcome and Apologies**

Marie Cavanagh welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their attendance. Apologies were registered for Jacqui Montgomery, Gary

Curran and Kevin Higgins, Michelle Furphy attended for Jacqui and Peter Murchan attended for Gary. Marie introduced Ann Meeke, who will be attending future meetings for Working Age Services, and also introduced Christina Hart as an observer.

## **2. Conflict of Interest**

Marie asked the Committee to look at the current agenda and declare any conflict of interest. None were declared.

## **3. Minutes of Last Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

## **4. Action Points**

**Action Point 12/21 (On-going):** The Committee will check if any improvements can be made to PIP once the Green and White papers are available.

**Action Point 1/22 (Closed):** Leo to provide terms of reference for potential future Standards Committee oversight role.

There was further discussion around the wording of the previous action point and clarity provided that a change to the Committee's TOR was not being proposed. It was agreed that how quality is embedded by the provider and PIP is directly relevant to decision making performance. As a replacement action Leo proposed that a focused session in relation to the quality regime for Personal Independence Payment would be arranged.

**Action Point 3/22 (Closed):** Bernie to schedule a meeting with Voluntary Sector outside greater Belfast at either Civic Spaces, Oxford Island, or the Councils. Bernie to also organise a schedule of visits for 2023/24, face to face meetings where possible.

A Voluntary Sector meeting took place on 16.11.22 in Oxford Island. The schedule of visits for 2023/24 will be finalised shortly and issued to the Committee

**Action point 6/22 (On-going):** Ann Meeke to provide updates at future Committee meetings on progress with legacy customers move to UC.

Michelle had a meeting with the Advice Sector, Ursula was present also. Michelle will prepare an update for the Committee and send it to Bernie to distribute. She will explain the difference between a sanction and a suspension. The key issue is the volume of sanctions. Michelle has been given assurances that processes are in place that management have to follow before a sanction can be issued. To issue a sanction is a last resort.

**Action Point 7/22 (Closed):** Bernie to amend the heading of the minutes of 16.6.22 from '2021' to '2022'. Heading amended

**Action Point 8/22 (Closed):** Bernie to ensure the Action Points are issued to all Committee members for agreement before producing the minutes -

**Action Point 9/22 (Closed at meeting):** Julie had discussed these targets with Brian Cullen with an update provided to the Committee at the meeting on how this proposal was reached.



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Targets.docx

The Committee were content with Brian's proposal as follows:

- the Carers Allowance Financial Accuracy Benchmark for the year 2022 will be set at 99%

- the Carers Allowance Decision-Making Accuracy Benchmark for the year 2022 will be set at 98%

Ursula was content with the benchmarks set but asked if another benefit had to be dropped off so that Carer's Allowance could be monitored. Julie explained that due to the move to Universal Credit that Jobseeker's Allowance was dropped off but that SAU planned to monitor Carer's Allowance again next year.

Marie had met with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) on 1 December 2022 and the measurement of other long-term benefits were mentioned. Marie asked if there were old standards being used for these benefits that need updating. Julie acknowledged the State Pension (SP) results and referring to the monitoring of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), advised that as there were no indicators of performance concerns there were no plans to measure DLA next year.

**Action Point: 10/22 (On-going).** On page 11 of the report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy for quarter 1 the number of new claims for Universal Credit was 15 in comparison to 119 supersessions. This was queried by Kevin. Julie and Michelle Furphy will look at the proportion of the supersessions looked at underpinning this result.

Michelle gave the Committee an update from her perspective. She had looked at decision making within Universal Credit and the numbers categorised as a new claim, revision, or supersession. There appears to be a higher proportion of supersessions compared to new claims. However, she would be happy to provide data to back this up for the Committee. Marie advised that since Kevin had raised this issue, it should be kept under review

**Action Point 11/22 (On-going):** Leo will ensure that there is representation from CMS at future Standards Committee meetings.

Update -Ros apologised that, due to a system failure, she could not attend the last meeting. Ros was advised that 664 was a statistically valid sample size but she

understands it should be transparent to the Committee why the sample has been reduced from 925 last year.

**Action Point 11/22** – Ros will find out why the sample size has reduced from 925 to 664 and report back to the Committee

**Action Point: 12/22 (On-going):** Michelle Furphy advised that Universal Credit were planning to do a focused session in November to discuss the processes and will provide a summary report for the Committee. The Committee agreed to share the protocol between DfC and the advice sector, in terms of referring / signposting people at risk of a sanction. Ursula may have access to the original template for the process.

Michelle advised that she had a meeting with the Advice Sector, Ursula was present also. Michelle will prepare an update for the Committee and send it to Bernie to distribute. She will explain the difference between a sanction and a suspension. The key issue was the volume of sanctions. Michelle has been given assurances that processes are in place that management must follow before a sanction can be issued. To issue a sanction is a last resort with the decision reviewed regularly in order to seek an opportunity to end any sanction imposed.

**Action Point 12/22.** Michelle will prepare an update from the meeting with the Advice Sector on 10 November 2022 for the Committee and send it to Bernie to distribute.

## **5. CMS Quarter 2 Report, 1 July to 30 December 2022**

Ros presented the CMS Quarter 2 report. CMS is on target to meet MVE accuracy. The sample size was set by Professional Services Unit (PSU). The DM accuracy is steady despite a lot of staff changes, i.e., movement of staff and Agency staff leaving. The Teams are working hard to keep the monitoring on track. CMS have also had problems with historical areas around income and shared care. However, to help keep on track Ros explained that targeted 'one to one' training has been organised. The figures quoted for Quarter 2 are slightly higher than those reported this time last year. Ursula queried the 3 challenges reported. Ros would provide the Committee with more information regarding these challenges for context.

**New Action Point 13/22:** Ros to provide more information on the challenges raised in the Quarter 2 report.

Marie thanked Ros for presenting the report.

## **6. DfC Quarter 2 Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy 1 April – 30 June 2022**

Julie presented the draft Department for Communities (DfC), Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy for the period 1 April to 30 June 2022.

### **Decision Making**

Two of the 5 decision making benchmarks have been achieved (Personal Independence Payment and Universal Credit), with both exceeding the benchmark set. Employment Support Allowance, State Pension and State Pension Credit all missed the target set. However, this was due to a small sample and a small number of errors. Julie pointed out that the Carer's Allowance benchmark had not been included as it had not been agreed at the time the report was produced. Ursula had said there was some confusion about the tables included in the report. Julie explained that future reports will be amended to make them easier to read.

**New Action Point 16/22** – Support team to produce a more streamlined report for subsequent meetings

### **Financial Accuracy**

All the 5 financial accuracy targets were met (with all 5 exceeding their target). Even though a target had not been agreed for Carer's Allowance at the time the result was 100%.

### **Overpayments**

A total of 16 cases were examined and no errors were raised resulting in an overall standard of 100%.

### **Appeals**

A total of 15 cases were examined and no errors were raised resulting in an overall standard of 100%.

Ursula stated that it was still early days and enquired if DfC expected the figures to change. Julie advised that there was no indication that the position for DfC will change that much by the end of year but pointed out that even a few cases being incorrect can skew the results.

Marie thanked Julie for presenting the report.

## **7. Clearance Times**

Leo advised the Committee that there was an influx of new claims for DLA, rising from 30% to 60%. To protect services to customers Leo had deployed overtime to alleviate the pressure. Brian also pointed out that new staff had been redeployed but if this influx continued additional resources would be required. He appreciates that doctors are pressurised at this time when trying to obtain evidence but advised that the Department would always reconsider

the case without the need for a request for a formal Mandatory Reconsideration in the event of any new evidence presented late in the claimant journey.

Leo has asked PSU to look at trends in DLA and to provide an analysis of applications and entitlement. The rise may be due to cost of living but, as of yet, the Department have no direct evidence of this.

Ursula was pleased to see funeral payments going out quickly but the result for Maternity Allowance (MA) result was quite high at minus 11.1 days. Anne advised that staff have been redeployed temporarily in the MA team and explained that older, outstanding cases that have a knock effect on the end of year out-turn. Ursula also mentioned the minus 17.6 days for IIB which stands out.

Leo advised the Committee that the clearance times result for PIP was missing from the table. Brian said that there have been 20-30% increase in calls motivated by the cost of living. The clearance times target for PIP has been set at 13 weeks (end to end) but as the customer has up to 6 weeks to complete the PIP2 form delays can also be impacted by time spent in the Capita space awaiting assessment. However, DfC are looking collectively to smooth the customer's journey and will include figures for PIP claim clearance going forward.

For Bereavement Support Payments Brian explained that these cases are fast tracked to ensure payment is issued as quickly as possible. The Branch have contact details for the General Register Office who can check details promptly.

**New Action Point 14/22:** Brian Cullen will include figures for PIP and Bereavement Support Payments in the next clearance times report.

Marie asked would the large number of new claims be possibly linked to the impact of Covid. Leo will ask PSU to provide an analysis of the top 5 -10 disability types for the Committee. Brian explained that long Covid may have been captured under respiratory or mental health in the system.



**New Action Point 15/22:** When PSU complete the analysis of the top 5-10 trends, Leo will share the results with the Committee.

## 8. PIP Quality Regime

Brian gave a presentation to the Committee.



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Marie thanked Brian for the useful presentation which provided the Committee with the latest changes within PIP.

Leo stated that the Disability Consultative Forums are useful and there was a session in November. Ursula asked if there were accessibility issues for customers when accessing DfC services if English is not their first language. There is a danger they may get left behind. Leo advised that the Department have interpreters' services and are currently looking at systemic issues around this as we want to make sure there are no impediments for customers accessing our services. Customers with special needs are catered for but the Department will continue to review provisions to ensure they address all accessibility needs. Marie pointed out that since the Community is becoming more diverse, we need to keep this in mind.

## 9. Standards Committee Meetings/Visits

**Pension Service**

**18 October 2022**

Marie stated that this had been a useful meeting. There was discussion around funeral payments and benchmarking for Pensions. Brian had started a

Stakeholder's quarterly meeting with the Pension Service. He will extend the invitation to Age NI and Pension Credit.

#### **10. Any Other Business**

None

Marie thanked everyone for attending.

The next meeting is scheduled for 8 March 2023.