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SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT 2006/2007

BETWEEN

THE VALUATION OFFICE AGENCY

AND

**.....HOUSING BENEFIT
DEPARTMENT OF A LOCAL AUTHORITY
WORKING WITH HOUSING BENEFIT REFORM**

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Housing Benefit

Model National Service Level Agreement between Local Authority Housing Benefit departments and the Valuation Office Agency 2006-07

PURPOSE

This model Local Housing Allowance scheme Service Level Agreement (SLA) has been drawn up by representatives from the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Valuation Office Agency. It has the approval of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Its purpose is to provide a framework for good working arrangements between local housing benefit (HB) departments and rent service offices.

This agreement is specially prepared for use in Housing Benefit departments operating the Local Housing Allowance scheme.

The primary aim of the SLA is to ensure Housing Benefit claimants are receiving efficient and cost effective services with as little delay as possible. The SLA is also designed to improve communications and contact between both sides through liaison meetings, open days, training and exchange programmes.

The agreements will be displayed prominently in both offices, so all staff are aware of the service they are expected to provide and what is expected of them.

To supplement this agreement the Valuation Office Agency publishes a Good Practice Guide which contains a detailed explanation of how rent officers make determinations within the statutory framework of their Order. This guide also provides details as to how the relationship between local authorities and local valuation teams should work.

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THE VALUATION OFFICE AGENCY WILL

Broad Rental Market Area (BRMA)

- Provide the local authority with details of all the BRMAs which fall wholly or partly within its area, so that all of the area is covered by a BRMA, and no BRMAs overlap
- Provide the local authority with details of those BRMAs or parts of BRMAs which fall within that authority's area
- Provide that information electronically with BRMA names, postcodes and names of distinct neighbourhoods, and then

Amend the BRMAs as and when appropriate, following the criteria set out in the Rent Officers' Order, and after discussion with the local authority, including Housing Strategy and other Teams as agreed locally.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA):

The VOA will, no more than five, and no less than three, working days before the end of each month:-

1. Provide a LHA for:

- a) the shared room category of dwelling, and
- b) each category of dwelling from 2 to 6 rooms
- c) such other categories of dwelling of more than 6 rooms as the Rent Officer believes are likely to be required to calculate Housing Benefit, following discussion with the local authority

Special Request for a LHA category

Where the local authority makes a specific request for a LHA category of dwelling with more than 6 rooms where no LHA has already been determined, the VOA will, within --- working days provide that LHA, but only for that month.

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As prescribed in the Local Housing Allowance Regulations only a specific claim type will now be referred to the Valuation Office Agency. These types are listed below and the VOA will endeavour to achieve the following targets in relation to these cases.

Cases exempt from LHA are:-

- Caravans
- Caravan sites
- Houseboats
- Moorings
- Hostels
- Where TRS decides that the rent includes a substantial amount for board and attendance

HB Determinations in LHA exempt cases (without inspection):

- Determine 94% of Housing Benefit cases (without inspection) within 3 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of Housing Benefit cases (without inspection) within 5 working days of receipt

HB Determinations in LHA exempt cases (with inspection):

- Determine 94% of Housing Benefit cases (with inspection) within 15 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of Housing Benefit cases (with inspection) within 25 working days of receipt

Redeterminations in LHA exempt and “effective”* cases:

- Determine 94% of Redetermination cases within 15 working days of receipt
- Determine 95% of Redeterminations cases within 20 working days of receipt

*An effective determination is one which has an impact on the current payment of benefit, has not been superseded by another determination and where a LHA has not been applied.

Identifying reference number in LHA exempt cases:

Determinations by the VOA will show the local authority's reference number but will not identify the claimant by name.

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Cases where board and attendance form a substantial part of the rent

When a rent is referred to the VOA because it includes board and attendance TRS will:-

Determine whether the board and attendance is a substantial part of the rent and:

- a) If it is, make determinations within the time limits above, and
- b) If it is not, inform the Local Authority within ----- days that the Local Housing Allowance applies

Indicative Rent Levels

The VOA will not provide Indicative Rent Levels

Electronic Interface System (EIS)

Where EIS is fully in use, The VOA will automatically transfer and download BRMA and LHA information to individual HB cases, to enable the LA to generate claimant assessments. BRMA mapping will be available in GIS on The VOA and the LA Internet sites.

Redeterminations

The VOA will provide redeterminations for all LHA exempt determinations, and for determinations in “phased approach” authorities where there is an existing effective determination.

Liaison Contact:

_____ will be available on tel: _____ between the hours of _____ and _____ Monday to Friday, to deal with specific queries. *

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LHA Liaison Meetings:

Hold at least quarterly meetings to review the performance of the agreement, to involve appropriate staff at all levels. On a monthly basis The VOA will share LHA and BRMA background information informally, to include data and rationale behind the decisions.

Monitor Performance:

At meetings, monitor the performance of the VOA and the HB office, and discuss the quality of service each provides.

Complaints:

Within 5 working days reply to any complaints from claimants or others about the VOA which have been passed on by the HB office.

Create Awareness:

Through staff exchange programmes and open days create opportunities for staff to meet and get a greater understanding of each other's roles.

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HOUSING BENEFIT DEPARTMENTS

As prescribed in the LHA Regulations only a specific claim type will now be referred to the VOA. These types are listed below and the LA will endeavour to provide full details for these claims to enable the VOA to achieve their targets in relation to these cases.

Cases exempt from LHA are:-

- Caravans
- Caravan sites
- Houseboats
- Moorings
- Hostels
- Housing Associations and Charitable/Voluntary Establishments
- Local Authority owned housing stock

Cases where board and attendance is included in the rent

Any case which appears to include any amounts for board and attendance will be referred to the VOA to determine whether the board and attendance is a substantial part of the rent.

The local authority will indicate clearly on the referral that these circumstances apply

HB Referrals in LHA exempt cases:

- Refer ___% of cases within 3 working days of receipt
- Refer ___% of cases within 5 working days of receipt

Redeterminations in LHA exempt and “effective”* cases:

- Refer ___% of redeterminations within ___ working days of receiving the request
- Refer ___% of redeterminations within ___ working days of receiving the request

*An effective determination is one which has an impact on the current payment of benefit, has not been superseded by another determination and where a LHA has not been applied.

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Identifying Reference Number in LHA exempt cases:

Provide a unique, identifying reference number for all referrals

Claimant's National Insurance Number in LHA exempt cases:

Endeavour to provide the claimant's National Insurance Number in all cases.

Claimant's telephone number in LHA exempt cases:

Endeavour to provide the claimant's telephone number in cases where it is known, to enable the VOA to resolve minor queries and make appointments to inspect.

Landlord's name and address in LHA exempt cases:

Endeavour to provide the landlord's name and address in all LHA exempt cases.

Complaints:

Within 2 working days pass on any complaints about the VOA (apart from redetermination requests) to the VOA for a reply.

Liaison Contact:

- _____ will be available on tel: _____, between the hours of _____ and _____ Monday to Friday to answer your questions. *

Liaison Meetings:

Hold at least quarterly meetings to review the performance of the agreement and to involve appropriate staff at all levels. On a monthly basis discuss LHA and BRMA background information informally with the VOA, to include apparent effects of the legislation, and any socio-economic changes the LA may be aware of which might affect future the VOA determinations. Meetings may include discussion of local Performance Indicators.

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Create Awareness:

Through staff exchange programmes create opportunities for staff to meet and get a greater understanding of each other's roles.

Joint Signatories to the agreement:

**Valuation Office Agency
Valuation Team Manager**

Housing Benefit Manager

**Valuation Office Agency
Redetermination Unit Manager**

Date:

*NB: * Subject to local agreement*