

Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee

27th November 2019

APPENDIX 1

Early Impact of Universal Credit Update report.

The below provides Members of the Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update of recommendations made as a result on the Universal Credit Workshops held in February, 2018.

National Asks of the Government

1. Advanced loan to become a payment that claimants do not have to repay.

For the purposes of clarity, the DWP offer the following.

- **Advance Payments** is a loan and may be applied for if a person cannot manage whilst waiting for their first Universal Credit payment. It can be repaid over a period of up to 12 months.
- **Personal Budgeting Loan** may be applied for once the first payment of Universal Credit has been made and is intended for help with expenditure such as unexpected bills, clothing, repairs to the home. It is repaid by direct deduction from the Universal Credit award, usually within 12 months.
- **Other deductions** may be made from a person's Universal Credit entitlement in respect of debts such as rent arrears, rent arrears and other housing costs like service charges. The deduction can be between 10% and 20% for rent arrears.

2. Apply the same premiums that were provided in the legacy benefits

- **Severe disability premium** (£62.45 per week), **Enhanced Disability Premium** (£15.90 per week) and the £65 per month **for lone parents** under the age of 25. If these premiums are not re-introduced; transitional arrangements should be put in place to help these claimants' budget for the lower income over a longer period of time. Transitional protection has now been introduced and mitigates the above.

3. Asks of the DWP locally

- **Increase the number of appointments available for ID checks** (there is currently a 9 day wait).
- **Help to Claim** is intended to support service users in the early stages of the Universal Credit claim, from the application, through to the first payment. Support available includes help in gathering evidence for the application and how to prepare for the first Jobcentre appointment.
- **For vulnerable client's** longer appointments to support them to do the ID checks, make the claim, and meet their Work Coach. This would reduce the number of times claimants would have to travel to the jobcentre to make a claim. Appointments are scheduled within 7 days of the on-line/telephone application.

4. Asks of the Council

- **Holistic, targeted support put in place for very vulnerable adults who do not have the capacity to navigate the complex system themselves e.g. refugees, people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities etc.**

Telephone applications have now been introduced by the DWP which ought to mitigate difficulties previously experienced

- **Advocacy support needs to be provided to support people at medical assessments for benefits to ensure their true situation is assessed, and the wrong decision is not made.**

The Local Authority no longer has a dedicated advocacy resource, it's Welfare Rights service being withdrawn with effect from April 2018.

- **Wirral reviews its delivery of Personal Budgeting Support (PBS) to encourage take up of the service. It is possible that the way it is being delivered is dissuading claimants to take up the service. Consideration should be given to determine whether Wirral is securing best value from the £150,000 per year funding supplied by the DWP for the service.**

Following review of Universal Support, the DWP have engaged with Citizens Advice Bureau nationally to deliver support in applying for Universal Credit.

- **Support for vulnerable claimants should be increased.**

When they are identified by the WP, the referral for personal budgeting support or ICT support should ideally result in a proactive approach from Wirral. When someone who contacts the claimant by phone to discuss their issues, the appropriate support should be arranged in a timely manner.

The authority no longer partners the DWP in delivery of Universal Support. Notwithstanding this both customer service advisor and operational staff do their utmost to support, advise and signpost those residents presenting who appear to be in need of assistance.

- **Wirral Council should review their current practice of only granting Discretionary Housing Payments to UC claimants for 3 months.**

The duration of award can vary and officers will apply appropriate discretion in considering applications for Discretionary Housing Payment, the likelihood of the applicants finding work, together with the capacity of the remaining DHP fund are key considerations made. Where there is little chance of moving into work, then it is likely the officer will recommend a longer period of award.

- **To avoid duplication and to ensure the claimant is provided with the best level of support, the Council should liaise with social landlords. Links are developing between Magenta and the DWP locally but there is nothing similar developing between Magenta and those in the Council providing personal budgeting support.**

The local authority no longer provides 'personal budgeting support' for those in receipt of Universal Credit, it is apparent that a number of Registered Social Landlords have in-house support provision, extending to benefits / income maximisation and assistance accessing means tested means of support. Social Landlords regularly attend the DWP's Customer Relationship Group forum with opportunity to engage locally accordingly.