

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 02 July 2019

Subject: Universal Credit Impact Working Group



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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To note this initial report describing the work of the Universal Credit Impact Working Group.**

Report:

1. This report introduces the early work of the Universal Credit Impact Working Group and the work that is on-going to support Universal Credit claimants in our district currently and describes plans for the future.

2. Universal Credit (UC) is a consolidation of a number of individual benefits into a single payment for claimants. The roll-out of UC to all the Job Centres in the District was completed in December 2018. UC will ultimately affect the majority of working-age benefit claimants which make up around 50% of our Housing Benefit caseload. As from 5th December any new Housing Benefit claimants of working age are now referred to the Job Centre to apply for Universal Credit which will incorporate the Housing element of their Benefit entitlement. There is a phased migration of existing Housing Benefit claimants onto Universal Credit which the Government has now extended to 2023.

3. UC is administered by the Department of Work and Pensions and a formal arrangement exists with Citizens Advice to provide advice and help with claims. The Council therefore has no official role in the UC claim process but it has been made well known that there have been problems with its roll-out nationally which affects the Council's residents and impacts on our services. Most of the issues have arisen out of the 5-week delay for claimants receiving their first UC payment although the timeframe has often been longer. These problems have been recognised by the Secretary of State who is currently reviewing elements of the UC process.

4. However, the current situation is affecting residents and the issues revolve around growing debt, vulnerable claimants and the claim process, the digital-by-default process and safeguarding concerns to name but a few. This inevitably then impacts on the demands for and performance of our services as people have problems paying their bills, such as rent and Council Tax which can lead to homelessness concerns, as an example.

5. Recognising the effect of the roll-out of UC on our residents and services a working group was set by the Council to see if these impacts could be mitigated against. Importantly it was recognised that to truly affect any outcomes a wider external membership would be needed. The group's membership now consists of Council departments (Customer Services, Housing, Revenues and Benefits, Safeguarding and Community Services), DWP, Epping Forest Food Bank, Peabody Trust, Citizens Advice, Churches Together and Epping Re-use with invites to other organisations dependant on the issues discussed. The Group is designed to create local solutions to a national problem.

6. There have now been a number of meetings which initially brought out the issues encountered by the users of all the organisations concerned. This was primarily focussed on a variety of UC claimant journeys, the issues they faced and the subsequent impact of that, whether it be an increase in debt or increased usage of the Foodbank as examples. This enabled the Group to establish a work programme looking at those outcomes and what could be done to mitigate against them.

7. The key issues identified were:

- Initial 5-week period before the first payment is made;
- Handling claimants with mental health issues;
- Debt;
- Work assessments;
- Awareness of alternative payment arrangements;
- Temporary accommodation of residents with specific issues such as learning difficulties;
- Publicity and awareness of services available for both claimants and organisations;
- Digital inclusion concerns as the process is digital by default;

8. The initial value of the Group has been linking the organisations together to offer effective signposting for claimants to specific areas of support. It is recognised that early intervention by the right organisation can significantly help an individual. It became evident that organisations within the Group were not aware of some of the help that was available for claimants and how this was structured to enable signposting to most effective. To that end the Group undertook a mapping exercise of the organisations known within the district, their location and what services and support they offer. This is a major step in ensuring that services become joined up for claimants.

9. From the Group's meetings thus far the following issues have been discussed and the actions taken are laid out below:

- There have been several communication and awareness outcomes which have helped link the support process for claimants and examples are:
 - Housing South and North e-mail addresses merged to enable consistent messaging around UC.
 - Citizens Advice are now aware of specialist help and home visits available from the DWP.
- There have also been improved processes around how cases in debt are handled:
 - Improved process between Council Tax and Benefits for Exceptional Hardship Payment take-up.
 - A project is underway to replace the Council's sundry debtor system and then to implement a Single View of Debt module to help manage an individual's total indebtedness more effectively.
 - Links developed between voluntary groups and Vulnerable Persons Officer in the Council's Debt Recovery Team
- The use of Multi-Agency Centres (MACS) has been discussed to explore the potential for their extension in terms of organisational involvement, location and frequency. MACS are where a number of agencies come together at Loughton Job Centre on a monthly afternoon to provide a single point of contact for claimants to get more holistic support. The agencies involved are DWP, MIND, EFDC, Integration Support Services, Peabody, Essex Lifestyle Service and the Citizens Advice. Discussions are on-going within the Working Group to see if a wider network of MACS could be provided potentially utilising halls provided by Churches Together. Future meetings of this select

committee will be updated with the progress.

- The Working Group has identified claimants with mental health conditions find the UC process difficult which can lead to loss of entitlement if the claim process is not completed in a timely and accurate manner. It is therefore vital that effective support exists for claimants and that staff and advisors can identify cases where mental health may be a concern for effective signposting and advice. The Group has identified where additional support is provided within the voluntary sector, such as Churches Together, and is also planning training for front-line staff as Mental Health First Aiders so services can be tailored for individuals more effectively.
- Concern was raised early in the Group that there was the potential for advisors, with the best of intentions, providing claimants with the wrong information which could affect their entitlement to Benefit. Given this and the potential myriad of support that is available to support claimants it was proposed that the Group look at a potential on-line hub, maybe hosted by EFDC, that would pull together all the local information for advisors and claimants with the technical information on UC updated by the DWP. Again the select committee will be updated at future meetings on this potential initiative.

10. This report has given the select committee a flavour of the work of the group and represents an exciting way that the Council can work with its partners in the public and third sector partners to provide better outcomes for our residents and reduces potential impacts on demands for services. There are a number of areas yet to be explored and more findings will be reported to a future select committee.

Reason for decision:

To note the work undertaken by the Group

Options considered and rejected:

None

Consultation undertaken:

None

Resource implications:

Budget provision: None

Personnel: None

Land: None

Community Plan/BVPP reference:

Relevant statutory powers:

Background papers:

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:

Key Decision reference: (if required)