

## BACKGROUND

Universal Credit (UC) went live in Leeds on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2016 and has focused only on single jobseekers.

In the Governments Autumn Budget in November 2017 a number of changes were announced that have had an impact on UC. The most significant impact for Leeds was the closing of the current UC claiming process and therefore, since 1/1/18 no further new claims for UC have been made in Leeds. This will remain the position until Leeds moves onto the full UC digital claiming platform on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2018.

As at end May 2018 there were approx. 5,500 on the current UC system. 59% of claims were in employment and 41% of claims were not in employment.

From 10<sup>th</sup> October 2018, DWP will close the claiming gateway for all NEW claims to benefits that UC is replacing ie (Job Seekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit) and people will need to claim UC instead. This is known as the transition phase.

The Council will play an important role in supporting people to make and maintain UC claims under the new digital system and to also support people to manage their monthly payments of UC to ensure their priority bills (inc rent payments) are maintained.

## MAIN ISSUES

- Once we move into the “transition” phase, all NEW claims will be made on the new DWP digital online claiming system. This means that people will make and manage all aspects of their UC via this online account and they will be required to notify changes of circumstances and interact with DWP via this online method.
- It is estimated by DWP that approx. 10,000 people in Leeds will claim UC in the first 12 months of full service.
- Any existing UC claims remaining on the current “live” service (5,500 as at May 2018) will have a 3 month window where claimants will need to make a new claim on the full service system. This is likely to be between November 2018 to March 2019. Further details from DWP are awaited as to how this will be administered.
- There will still be a group of people who will not be able to claim and instead they will continue to claim the legacy benefits that UC is replacing. Any couples or families with 3 or more children will fall into this group and so they will continue to claim help with any housing costs through Housing Benefit. This is an interim measure until DWP advise that the UC digital system is ready to accept UC claims from this group of people. This is expected to be sometime in January 2019
- Any people living in Supported or Temporary accommodation will claim UC but they will continue to have help with their housing costs by claiming Housing Benefit
- The council will have no access to any DWP UC systems and so will be unable to provide any advice or support relating to UC calculations and payments.
- The final phase of roll out is the migration phase which sees all remaining legacy benefit claimants migrated onto UC. This phase is expected to run from January 19 through to March

2023. There are few details known about this phase at this time but the process will not be a 'drag and drop' process where information and data is passed from legacy systems to UC. Instead, legacy benefits will be closed down and claimants will need to make a separate claim for UC. No date has been given as to when Leeds will start this migration phase.

## **FULL SERVICE PREPERATIONS**

A large amount of work was undertaken by the council ahead of its "live" service date in February 2016, to ensure customers and organisations were ready for the implementation of UC in Leeds. These preparations have been re enhanced over the last 12 months to ensure we are as fully prepared as possible to support people as required under the full digital system of UC.

### **Customer Services (supporting Customers)**

The main emphasis for the council will be supporting people to make and manage a UC claim and also to provide personal budgeting support to enable people to manage the monthly UC payment. DWP will fund the council to provide this support and the initial funding is based on the following estimates.

For the period Oct – Mar 2019 (6 months) it is estimated 640 people will need support to make a UC claim and 1050 people will need personal budgeting support.

There will still be an element of Housing Benefit claims until we move into the "migration phase" and beyond and this will impact on customers and front facing services in terms of understanding and dealing with a "dual system" for some years to come.

#### **➤ Assisted Digital Support**

Community Hubs are already playing a key role in supporting people to get online and this is something that is already evident as part of the Citizens@Leeds agenda. Online claiming support is not considered to be anything new to the Community Hubs current practices and it is anticipated that any support requirements for Universal Credit claiming will be contained within the Community Hubs existing provision.

As roll out expands the demand to provide further support to help people make and manage their online UC accounts will increase.

A triage approach will be adopted within the Hubs for establishing the type of online support required by each customer. Anybody requiring assisted support to make a UC claim will be given an appointment where an officer will provide support to make the claim. This online support will be available at Community Hubs across the city. Customers will be referred for digital training via the library service to support them to improve their digital capabilities for future.

Customers attending appointments for digital support to make a UC claim will undergo a vulnerability assessment and where it is identified that even with further digital skills training support it is unlikely that the customer will be able to manage the online UC regime, they will be referred to DWP where further support can be given by the Job Centre.

#### **➤ Personal Budgeting Support (PBS)**

Customers being referred for PBS will have the choice of receiving this support either face to face or on the phone. This support can be provided either by Customer Access or if they are a social tenant by their landlord. A joint approach is being taken by Customer Access and Housing to ensure a consistency in any PBS is given. Support includes managing a basic household budget, managing a bank account, and making payments.

Face to face support will initially be offered at the following Hubs: Merrion Centre , Dewsbury Road, Compton Centre and Armley. This will be reviewed as full service expands and rolled out to additional Hubs as required.

### **Awareness / workshops / information Sessions –**

A number of training and awareness sessions have taken place within the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector and organisations including VAL (Voluntary Action Leeds) have been involved in ensuring local organisations attend sessions. In partnership with DWP, 2 full days were delivered to various groups and front line services, these included services both internal and external to the council, that will be dealing with people who will need to claim UC from October. All childrens centres managers across the city will also receive awareness sessions.

Internal sessions have also been delivered to managers within the councils catering /cleaning and waste management services as it is likely that staff working within these services may also eligible to claim UC.

Support has been given to the debt forums across the city to develop their own material around awareness / promotion. This will be a consistent message in line with the councils approach.

Forums and seminars for private landlords have been provided by DWP to educate landlords on the implications of UC for their tenants and the impacts that UC will have on their rental income for their rental.

### **Housing Benefit (HB) back office function**

Work within the current Benefit service is taking place to ensure the service will deliver a smooth transition from HB to UC from October and one of the key requirements will be to ensure council tax support take up is maximised. Free School Meals administration will continue to be administered by the HB back office function .

A key issue for the service is the current volume of information received from DWP via its automation function. This area is under close monitoring by current full service sites and feedback and resolution discussions are ongoing.

### **Publicity / communications / leaflets**

DWP have a developed UC website which staff will direct people to which provides a host of UC materials and information. In addition the council has updated and relaunched a public leaflet which provides details of where people can go to get support to get online and also advice on what to do to get ready for UC.

A staff support guide has also been produced which will give staff guidance on how to deal with queries and how to support people with making and managing a UC claim and also how to direct for budgeting support.

The councils UC web page will be updated ahead of full service providing full details of UC and what people need to do to make a claim.

### **Staff training**

All relevant customer services officers will be provided with training and awareness on UC to ensure a consistent message is provided from the council covering:

- Online claiming support
- Personal Budgeting support

### **Digital awareness / upskilling**

The Library service are looking at digital support across the whole city and 2/3 digital inclusion coordinators have been appointed to increase capability and coordination in the city and to generate engagement.

“Learn my way” is an online tool taking people through the whole UC experience and Libraries will be utilising this product when supporting people with digital upskilling around UC claiming.

A “get online in Leeds” booklet has been produced which shows PC access and digital skills support across the councils public sites. There is also an online digital map that will allow advisors to provide accurate signposting to local organisations where online support can be given.

Leeds City College has developed a course specifically to support people through the UC claim process and it is for anybody struggling to access digital systems.

### **Full service site visits**

As Leeds is one of the last LA's to move into full service, a number of visits have been made to existing full service sites. These visits have enabled officers to gain information as to issues / difficulties that other LA's are experiencing and with this knowledge processes are being developed to mitigate impacts for customers, staff and support organisations.

## **SUPPORTING HOUSING LEEDS TENANTS**

Housing Leeds have reviewed the UC action plan in preparation for the launch of full service in Leeds in October. The plan is a cross tenure plan including actions required for council tenancies, housing support and private sector housing. We are continuing to work closely with colleagues in Communities and Environment, other council departments and other partners to ensure a joined up approach to the introduction of Universal Credit across the city.

Central to our approach is ensuring that our service offer builds on the experience we have gained through live service and is consistent with the council wide service offer; that our staff teams are trained and prepared to deliver at the launch of full service and to ensure that knowledge and information about UC is mainstreamed across our entire staff team in preparation for full migration to UC. These priorities are reflected in our action plan where the themes are:

- Service actions - we are reviewing our service offer to continue to provide wrap around service for tenants who most need it. We will develop a clear criteria to determine how we ensure all tenants receive a level of support which allows them to make and maintain their UC claim.
- Training - a training plan is being developed for those staff who will be supporting tenant's receiving UC. Information will then be cascaded to staff in wider teams to ensure broader understanding.
- Communications- which are timely so that the information is relevant to what is happening at the time and ongoing to build ensure impact and recollection.

Housing Leeds have continued to support tenants claiming Universal Credit, and those affected by the benefit cap and the under occupancy charge.

- We have had 1,365 tenants claim Universal Credit during live service. Of these 457 are live claims.
- We have had 335 tenants affected by the benefit cap, which has reduced from 385 a year ago.
- We have had 4,351 under occupation cases and were working with 1,867 tenants in arrears and affected by the charge. Both the numbers of tenants in arrears and the amount owing has reduced over the last 12 months.

## **CONCLUSION**

UC national roll out is now into its 5<sup>th</sup> year and on the latest information from DWP it will take until 2023 to be fully rolled out across the country. Once it is fully rolled out in Leeds it is estimated there will be approx. 85,000 people claiming UC. The council has been preparing for this wider roll out for the past 3 years and we are confident that we have done everything possible to ensure our customers, staff and partner services are prepared for this change to the way people claim welfare benefits.

It is proposed that once we have been in full service for 6 months, we will report back on the initial impacts of full service UC in Leeds and how this is affecting customers and the council's ability to support those impacted by this change.