

REPORT TO MARR AREA COMMITTEE – 2 OCTOBER 2018

UNIVERSAL CREDIT FULL SERVICE IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH ABERDEENSHIRE

1 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

1.1 Note and support the work that is being carried out in respect of Universal Credit Full Service rollout in Central and South Aberdeenshire.

2 Background / Discussion

- 2.1 Universal Credit (UC) replaces a number of state benefits for working age claimants and amalgamates them into one monthly payment. It replaces Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance (income based), Employment and Support Allowance (income related) and Working Tax Credit (all of these benefits are also known as ‘the legacy benefits’).
- 2.2 There are currently two types of UC - UC full service and UC live service. UC live service was rolled out in Aberdeenshire between May 2015 and April 2016. UC live service limited claims to claimants who were single, fit for work and looking for work. All new claims under the live service were ceased from 31 December 2017.
- 2.3 From 31 October 2018, claims for Universal Credit will be made under the full service in central and south Aberdeenshire, which is covered by Aberdeen Jobcentre. At the same time, any existing claims under the live service will be transferred to full service.

UC Full Service

- 2.4 UC full service extends the eligibility to all working age people, therefore increasing the number of people eligible to apply.
- 2.5 Unlike live service, UC full service is digital by default i.e. all claims will be made and managed online via an appropriate internet-enabled device. Claimants will be required to manage their account through their online journal (similar to an online diary which records notes actions and events). Claimants who are unable to apply for UC, or manage their UC account, online should contact the free UC helpline.
- 2.6 UC full service rolled out to the Montrose Job Centre in November 2017, followed by Peterhead, Banff and Fraserburgh Job Centre areas on 27 June 2018. The introduction of UC Full Service at Aberdeen City, Ebury Jobcentre from 31 October 2018 concludes the roll out in Aberdeenshire.

Scottish Choices

- 2.7 The Scottish Government laid regulations in the Scottish parliament in June 2017 to make UC payments more flexible. These 'Scottish choices' allow claimants in Scotland to choose whether they want their housing costs paid direct to their landlord and/or if they want their UC paid twice monthly rather than monthly. These choices will be offered to all persons receiving UC in full service areas, via their journal on their online account, after their first UC payment has been made.

Preparation for Full Service rollout

- 2.8 In preparation for the introduction of UC full service in Central and South Aberdeenshire, Aberdeenshire Council are continuing to work in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and other local services to develop a shared understanding of full service and to strengthen the network of support services throughout Aberdeenshire.
- 2.9 Prior to the roll out of UC full service in Kincardine & Mearns and North Aberdeenshire, a number of UC awareness events took place to raise awareness and share information about UC with internal and external staff. These events were well received and similar events are planned in Inverurie and Stonehaven during October. Invites will be sent out to various support services throughout Aberdeenshire. Depending on numbers, a further event will be arranged in Ballater if required.
- 2.10 In addition, Aberdeenshire Council and DWP will attend a Private Landlord information event in Banchory on 27 September 2018. This will give landlords the opportunity to ask any questions regarding UC.
- 2.11 Other partnership activities include:
- Staff from Aberdeenshire Council's Support and Advice Team continue to attend internal and external partnership meetings to provide UC updates.
 - Working with support agencies, including Citizen's Advice Bureau, to ensure personal budgeting and digital support is offered and provided.
 - Aberdeenshire Council, in partnership with support agencies, provides an 'Advice Agencies and Useful Contacts in Aberdeenshire' and 'Digital Access' leaflet. These leaflets list the agencies where people can go for financial advice, digital support and computer access in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen.
 - Regular meetings and communications with the DWP Partnership Manager to ensure latest UC updates are received and issues escalated.
 - Regular UC full service update articles in the 'Tenant's Newsletter' and attendance at the Tenancy Working Group meeting.
 - Collation and analysis of UC related statistics which are then presented to internal meetings and/or DWP.
- 2.12 Where appropriate the challenges associated with UC, e.g. potential accumulation of rent arrears, have been highlighted to our partner organisations so that relevant support mechanisms can be put in place.

2.13 Housing have introduced and updated IT systems and have put procedures in place to assist staff when contacting tenants on UC Full Service. This includes:

- Payment Arrangement Modules – Allows arrangements to be set up on Northgate Rent System and if payment missed, within 24 hours a prompt is sent to a Housing Arrears Officer (HAO).
- Key Details – New module which allows us to record tenant is on UC and how payments are being received.
- All HAO have mobile technology which allow them to assist tenants in their homes with claims for UC or any other benefits.
- All HAO aim to contact each tenant when we are made aware of UC Full Service Claim and ensure they are aware of all processes relating to UC and paying their rent.
- Landlord Portal – DWP system where we are asked to verify our tenants rent to enable UC Housing element to be paid to tenant. This is a paperless system and has assisted with ensuring correct information is sent to DWP to allow claims to be processed quickly and without error.
- The impact on staff resources of the anticipated increased workload is also continuing to be monitored but currently this is being managed well within existing resources.
- The service has reviewed the way HAOs work with UC claimants and have increased efforts to contact tenants to explain UC and offer direct support.
- The housing service continue to meet and work closely with DWP and Advice Agencies to ensure any issues are addressed and regular updates are received by all.

2.14 The number of claims are low at present as only postcodes AB54, AB55, and AB56 have moved to full service but an increase is expected when full service rolls out to the remaining area on 31 October 2018.

Scottish Welfare Fund

2.15 The Aberdeenshire Support and Advice Team has noted an increase in the number of UC claimants requesting a Crisis Grant whilst waiting for their initial monthly payment. However, claimants are being signposted to claim a Universal Credit advance which is available from the DWP.

2.16 Claimants can apply for up to 100% of their estimated UC award and are usually advised if they are successful on the same day as their application. Any advance must be paid back from future UC payments, over 12 months.

2.17 There are no available statistics regarding the number of UC claimants making a claim from the Scottish Welfare Fund. Awards for Crisis Grants are made based on a person's personal circumstances rather than specific income type.

2.18 The Head of Finance, Monitoring Officer within Business Services, Head of Housing, and the Director of Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and comments are incorporated within the report

and they are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation

3 Scheme of Governance

- 3.1 The Committee is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of Section B.1.2 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as the Committee is being asked to consider a matter or policy which impacts their Area.

4. Implications and Risk

- 4.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required because the reason for the report is for the committee to note and consider and there will be no differential impact, as a result of the report, on people with protected characteristics.
- 4.2 The staffing requirements relating to this report will be met within existing resources. The impact of UC will continue to be monitored and staffing resources and/or reconfiguration of workload may be reviewed.
- 4.3 A Town Centre First Impact Assessment is not required for this report as it deals with highlighting the work that has been undertaken locally regarding the introduction of Universal Credit in the North Aberdeenshire area and makes note of housing performance measures and the potential for rent arrears.
- 4.4 With reference to the [Corporate and Directorate Risk Registers](#) the risk relates to budget pressures due to the anticipated increase to rent arrears.

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