

## REPORT TO GARIOCH AREA COMMITTEE – 9 OCTOBER 2018

### UNIVERSAL CREDIT FULL SERVICE IN ABERDEENSHIRE

#### 1 Recommendations

**The Committee is recommended to note and support the work that is being carried out in respect of Universal Credit Full Service rollout in 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 the Garioch area, 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 the Garioch area, 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 2018. Invites will be sent out to various support services throughout Aberdeenshire.
- 2.10 In addition, Aberdeenshire Council and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will attend a Private Landlord information event in Inverurie on 26 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 Universal Support**

2.15 Where claimants have difficulty accessing or using online services, universal support can be provided. Universal support is advice and support provided by DWP, Aberdeenshire Council or local support providers for the purpose of assisting claimants with –

- Making a claim for Universal Credit and/or managing their online claim (assisted digital support);
- Managing their financial affairs (personal budgeting support)

2.16 Aberdeenshire Council is working closely with local support providers to monitor the number of people requiring support to make a claim for Universal Credit or manage their finances.

2.17 DWP makes funding available to Local Authorities to help deliver Universal Support. Where support cannot be provided by Aberdeenshire Council, assistance will be sought from a local support provider. Aberdeenshire Council is currently entering into a data sharing and grant agreement with various support providers to ensure assistance can be provided in a timely manner where necessary.

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 of policy which impacts its 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 With reference to the Corporate and Directorate Risk Registers ([found here](#)), the risk relates to budget pressures due to the anticipated increase to rent arrears. This risk is being mitigated as set out at 2.13. In addition, Housing have a contact procedure in place to make contact with all UC claimants to discuss their claim and paying rent. Housing will discuss information such as when they expect their first payment to be received, the frequency of payment, how to apply for an advance payment and pay rent directly to the landlord so that they do not fall into rent arrears. Housing will also ask if the tenant feels they require any financial advice or assistance and will signpost them to any additional agencies requested.

### **Ritchie Johnson, Director of Business Services**

Report prepared by: Ricki Lyon, Development Officer, Aberdeenshire Support and Advice Team  
Tracy Noles, Service Development Officer, Housing Finance  
21 September 2018