

COMMITTEE REVIEW - UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND OTHER WELFARE BENEFIT CHANGES

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| Committee name | Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee |
| Officer reporting | Anisha Teji, Democratic Services Officer |
| Papers with report | None |
| Ward | All |

HEADLINES

The Committee is undertaking a review into Universal Credit and other welfare benefit changes and how the Council can support residents through the transition to, and future successful management of, their Universal Credit (UC) claims.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee notes and comments on the information presented in this report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The agreed Terms of Reference for the review are set out below:

Terms of Reference

1. To understand the impact that the introduction of the full UC service has had in areas where it has been rolled out. To include the cumulative impact of the introduction of UC and other welfare benefit changes.
2. To understand the impact that UC, alongside other welfare benefit changes, is having and is expected to have on local residents in Hillingdon and on the income and costs of the Council, housing associations and other local organisations.
3. To examine how the Council services, housing associations and voluntary groups are supporting residents to transition to UC and manage their claims.
4. To make practical, prudent recommendations to Cabinet (and other bodies if applicable) from the Committee's findings to support residents transitioning to UC and to manage their claims.

Witness sessions

Throughout the course of its review, the Committee heard from a variety of witnesses.

| Date of witness session | Witnesses attended |
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| Witness session 1 26 September 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Debby Weller – Policy and Strategy Manager (Housing)• Inderpal Mudhar – Partnership Manager for The Department of Work and Pensions |
| Witness session 2 17 October 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ellen Salkeld – Income Manager at Catalyst• Stuart Coleman – Head of Housing Management at The Barnet Group |
| Witness session 3 28 November 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rod Smith – Tenancy Management Team - Service Manager• Mark Billings – Homelessness - Housing Manager |
| Member site visit 5 December 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sukh – Customer Lead Manager for Hayes and Uxbridge• Inderpal Mudhar – Partnership Manager for The Department of Work and Pensions |
| Witness session 4 16 January 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heather Brown – Director and Barbara Maccauley – Policy Manager from the Citizens Advice Hillingdon• Nigel Gee – Senior Mental Health Worker from MIND• Giles Stratchan – Uxbridge College Partnership Manager from Uxbridge College |
| Witness session 5 14 February 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nigel Gee – Senior Mental Health Worker from MIND• Inderpal Mudhar – Partnership Manager for The Department of Work and Pensions |

Review update

Following witness session 4 on 16 January 2019, Members raised concerns regarding the information provided. Members sought further clarification on the points raised, particularly in relation to the support offered to claimants claiming Universal Credit who had mental health issues.

On 14 February 2019, some Members and officers with met Nigel Gee (NG) – Senior Mental Health Worker from MIND and Inderpal Mudhar (IM) – Partnership Manager for The

Department of Work and Pensions to discuss the support available for claimants.

The following key points were noted at the meeting:

- It is crucial to ensure that proper and adequate safeguards are in place for people making UC application, particularly when there are mental health issues involved.
- Members were keen on finding ways that help people so they did not get lost in the system. There was a real concern for people who had no mental capacity to make claims and it was important that these people were signposted to the right services and received the correct advice.
- Since the introduction of UC, Mind had seen a significant impact on people with mental health issues. More support was required in making applications, as many people lacked IT skills, had chaotic lifestyles and needed assistance in doing applications online.
- Real life case studies were provided to Members. An example was provided of a claimant with anxiety being referred to the Job Centre Plus (JCP) for their appointment, when they attended there was no record of the appointment, the claimant was then questioned by staff members and this led them to being even more anxious about the whole process. Members were keen on avoiding issues such as this as it could impact different claimants in different ways. It was advised that this type of application should have been triaged with disability advisors first. It was agreed that IM would liaise directly with NG to investigate the issue further.
- IM explained the route way and process for processing claims for people with mental health issues. It was confirmed that all JCP staff members were trained in mental health.
- CAB and Uxbridge College was providing support to claimants through free IT training.
- Members considered some suitable recommendations for the review may be around more collaborative working between different agencies, initiatives to look into ensuring that security staff had relevant training to assist vulnerable claimants when entering JCP buildings, better processing for signposting and referring people, and receiving regular updates from the Council's housing advice service.

At the meeting on 18 March 2019, the Committee will discuss potential recommendations for the review. Based on these recommendations, a draft final report will be prepared by Democratic Services for the meeting in April 2019.

Implications on related Council policies

While much of this topic is set nationally set, for any changes locally, the role of the Policy Overview Committees is to make recommendations on service changes and improvements to the Cabinet who are responsible for the Council's policy and direction.

How this report benefits Hillingdon residents

Policy Overview Committees directly engage residents and external partners in the work they do.

Financial Implications

These are primarily for residents claiming UC, as set out in the background papers.

Legal Implications

The primary legislation relating to Universal Credit is the Welfare Reform Act 2012, with further regulations following thereafter.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Scoping Report

Previous Committee papers on the review published on the Council's website