

REVIEW BY THE SOCIAL CARE, HOUSING AND PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE- UNIVERSAL CREDIT: LIKELY FAVOURABLE AND ADVERSE IMPACTS, RISKS AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIP RESPONSE

Cabinet Member(s)	Councillor Philip Corthorne Councillor Jonathan Bianco
Cabinet Portfolio(s)	Social Services, Housing, Health and Wellbeing Finance, Property & Business Services
Officer Contact(s)	Anisha Teji, Chief Executive's Office
Papers with report	Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee's review on Universal Credit: likely favourable and adverse impacts, risks and local partnership response

HEADLINES

Summary	To receive the Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee's review into Universal Credit: likely favourable and adverse impacts, risks and local partnership response. To give consideration to the recommendations of the review.
Putting our Residents First	This report supports the following Council objective of: <i>Our People</i> .
Financial Cost	The recommendations proposed as a result of this review do not in themselves have a direct financial impact on Council finances.
Relevant Policy Overview Committee	Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee
Relevant Ward(s)	All

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Cabinet welcomes the Committee's findings and recommendations from their review into the introduction of Universal Credit in Hillingdon, a national initiative led by the Department for Work and Pensions.
2. That Cabinet notes the good preparations, effort and staff training in place which has enabled the Council to provide effective support to residents where Universal Credit rolled out by the Department for Work and Pensions has impacted on their housing and related budget management.
3. Notes the Committee's concerns regarding the more vulnerable residents that apply for Universal Credit and requests that the Universal Credit Project Group considers the following areas for possible further investigation or improvement:
 - I. Strengthen collaborative work between key partnerships such as the DWP, CA, MIND and Council Officers;
 - II. Explore other opportunities that may lead to IT assistance for claimants who have a lack of access to IT to apply for Universal Credit and courses to develop basic IT skills that are relevant;
 - III. Develop clear processes/ procedures for signposting people to the right services and agencies through liaison and establishing key accountabilities of each organisation;
 - IV. Explore and develop further ways to increase awareness of debt management of claimants and ensuring that this is monitored by the relevant agencies appropriately.
 - V. Appropriate training be provided to staff across the Council so that officers are able to refer residents to the right services and agencies.
4. Request that the Committee and relevant Cabinet Members receive a further report on the Council's efforts in 6 – 12 months, with regard to claimant statistics and their experience - this being one year on after its roll-out began.

Reasons for recommendation

To consider the report of the Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee's review into Universal Credit: likely favourable and adverse impacts, risks and local partnership response.

Alternative options considered / risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some or all of the Committee's recommendations, or pursue alternative routes in which to progress the objectives of the review.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

In light of significant national changes to legislation in recent years, Members of the Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee decided to review what mechanisms and processes in place to support residents migrating to Universal Credit.

The Terms of Reference of the review were as follows:

- I. To understand the impact that the introduction of the full Universal Credit 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.
- II. 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.
- III. To examine how the Council services, housing associations and voluntary groups are supporting residents to transition to UC and manage their claims.
- IV. 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.

The Committee undertook a range of witness sessions with a variety of internal and external representatives, including Citizens Advice, MIND, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), a housing association and an arm's length management organisation (ALMO). As part of the evidence gathering, Members also conducted a site visit to the Jobcentre Plus in Uxbridge to consider how the system worked in practice and what support was available on the front line for residents. Members appreciated how insightful these witness sessions were to assist them in their deliberations.

During the in-depth review, it became apparent to Members that the changes being introduced nationally, have had an effect on some claimants, particularly the more vulnerable and those with mental health conditions. The Committee spent a significant time scrutinising whether there were adequate and proper safeguards in place for such claimants. Members concluded that there was room for improvement in the processes and support available by the DWP and on reflection, the Committee found the evidence it received to be insightful but also at times alarming, particularly when hearing resident case studies.

On the Council's part, where it works with the Department of Works and Pensions as part of the Universal Credit Project Group, the Committee noted the good preparations in place where the migration to Universal Credit had impacted on their housing and related budget management.

In considering areas for improvement, the Committee has made recommendations primarily aimed externally, to strengthen the collaborative working between partners, clearer processes for signposting and support to more vulnerable claimants.

The Committee considers its recommendations will assist the transition for residents moving to Universal Credit and that they feel well informed and supported during that process.

Officer comments on the recommendations

In the Council's capacity as a landlord significant progress has been made in maximising the opportunities for intervention and support during the UC claimant journey and during the period of the claim. Over 1100 Council tenants are now successfully claiming UC and approximately one third are the subject of an alternative payment arrangement. This means that, for reasons of vulnerability and or arrears of rent, the Council is receiving payments directly from the DWP to meet the rent. The uplift in arrears of rent for new claimants remains under one week's average rent. As the number of claimants continues to grow, new processes and ways of working are being 'stress tested' to ensure the service remains responsive to the needs of tenants. The landlord service welcomes the recommendations made to strengthen collaborative working and ensure that interventions and support are both timely and effective in meeting the needs of more vulnerable households. The Universal Credit Project Group is well placed to move the recommendations forward as well as identify further ways to support the most vulnerable households to ensure that claims are successfully made and managed in the long term as part of a holistic approach to tenancy sustainment.

The Universal Credit Project Group would explore opportunities that may lead to IT assistance for claimants who have a lack of access to IT to apply for Universal Credit and courses to develop basic IT skills that are relevant by working with third party organisations such as Citizens Advice and other voluntary/community organisations (such as church groups). The Council would explore opportunities through existing arrangements and courses, e.g. those offered by our Adult Education Centre, Uxbridge College etc... as well as exploring opportunities through Brunel University.

Overall, as part of the implementation of Universal Credit, the Council will continue assisting in its partnership role as the Borough moves towards a managed full migration to Universal Credit [currently by June 2023].

Financial Implications

The recommendations proposed as a result of this review relate primarily to process and partnership improvements, and exploration of ways to improve support to claimants. On the Council's part, they will not require any additional resources.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?

The recommendations will support the Council's efforts to make sure residents that apply for Universal Credit have the best support in place and signposted to the appropriate services for assistance.

Consultation carried out or required

The Committee sought a wide range of external witness testimony as set out in its report.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance has reviewed this report, noting that there would be no direct financial implications of the Policy Overview Committee's recommendations in respect of processes and joint working with partner organisations.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that there are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL.