

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 22 July 2014
Report for: Information
Report of: Director of Finance

Report Title

Universal Credit Roll Out – Impact on Trafford Assist

Executive Summary

Trafford's Universal Credit Delivery Partnership Agreement was implemented on 23rd June 2014. The Scrutiny Committee have requested the impact of the agreement on the delivery of the Council's local welfare provision, Trafford Assist.

As the agreement is fully funded by the Department of Work and Pensions the Council is able to provide the local services requested by the DWP to support their Universal Credit roll out programme, this includes additional Trafford Assist resource.

In addition to the Universal Credit services, the additional resource can be used to support other Trafford Assist customers who it is deemed may require personal budgeting support.

The information and intelligence gained by providing these local services can be used to form future decision making in relation to the wider Universal Credit roll out and associated demand on Council services.

Recommendation(s)

That the Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of this report.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Papers: None

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1 Background

- 1.1 One of the main elements of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 is the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) to provide a single streamlined benefit. UC, which is administered by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), includes child tax credit, working tax credits, Employment Support Allowance (ESA), Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), Income Support and Housing Benefit.
- 1.2 UC has been live in Pathfinder sites for a limited number of claimants since April 2013 and has broadly operated as expected in these sites. The DWP are now expanding UC in the North West of England. On 23 June 2014 Altrincham and Stretford jobcentres became live UC sites. The remaining Trafford associated jobcentres, Wythenshawe, Alexandra Park and Chorlton will go-live in tranche 2.
- 1.3 The DWP invited all of the North West authorities to provide services that will support the UC roll out. The support is fully funded by the DWP and is detailed in a Delivery Partnership Agreement (DPA). Trafford Council has agreed to provide the UC support services to support its most vulnerable residents and consequently have a DPA in place from the 23 June.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The activities that the DWP have asked Trafford Council to undertake, which are included in the DPA, are as follows:
 - Provide expertise to UC Service Centre staff on complex housing issues;
 - Supported claimants to get on-line and stay on-line;
 - Process Council Tax Support (CTS) for UC claimants using manual processes;
 - Support claimants with complex needs and those that require personal budgeting;
 - Work with UC Programme in preparing landlords.
- 2.2 The purpose of the DPA is to formalise the agreement to work with DWP on UC activities from 23 June to 31st March 2015 only. The DPA includes the management information to be collected on UC, data protection and freedom of information requirements, outlines the tasks expected to be undertaken by both parties, funding arrangements and termination arrangements should this be necessary by either the Council or the DWP.
- 2.3 Within the Revenues and Benefits service, the expertise is available to provide support to the UC Service Centres. The service will also be able to carry out the manual processes required for the CTS claims received from UC claimants. The DWP funding will allow the post holders duties to be filled.
- 2.4 Trafford already offers on-line access to its residents through a variety of access points across the borough. Working with one of its existing partners, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), on-line support will also be available. CAB already has a full time bureau in Sale, Stretford and Altrincham and a part time bureau in Partington

and Urmston. Webcam facilities are available in Old Trafford library. CAB will support Trafford residents who need assistance to complete the UC application form and in job searches such as the Universal Job Match. The CAB will also be expected to support online applications for CTS.

- 2.5 Landlord engagement is an important part of the UC roll-out. The Council already works closely with Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) across a number of services, such as Housing and Benefits. Working with the UC implementation team, positive engagement and informative sessions will be held. The Benefit Bus which is funded through the AGMA Help with Rent team will also be used to provide advice to Trafford residents on UC and promote digital inclusion.
- 2.6 Personal Budgeting Support (PBS), which is the main subject matter of this report, will be provided by a dedicated member of staff who will be placed within the Trafford Assist team.

3.0 Trafford Assist

- 3.1 Trafford Assist was created due to the abolition of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans by the DWP.
- 3.2 The Trafford Assist model was designed to be innovative and transformational, to deliver maximum benefits for a very vulnerable cohort of Trafford Residents, whilst ensuring best value for the Council.
- 3.3 The delivery of Trafford Assist has exceeded expectations with positive customer comments received from both customers and agencies.
- 3.4 The average turnaround time for a decision to be made is 1.4 days and the wrap-around and signposting service remains an important part of the scheme, with a dedicated Welfare Rights officer recruited at the start of 2014 to support residents with DWP appeals in appropriately identified cases.
- 3.5 To enable continual improvement, applications are analysed to identify trends which are used to enhance the support provided. In particular, repeat applications are monitored.
- 3.6 The vast majority of applications (85%) are awarded on the basis of the customer being in hardship. In cases where this is fully, or partly, due to a benefits issue then this is referred to either colleagues within the Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support teams or the dedicated Welfare Rights officer as detailed in 3.4 above.
- 3.7 In cases where maximum benefit is already in payment, customers are signposted to advice agencies. However, it has been noted that these customers are submitting further applications to Trafford Assist on the basis of hardship.
- 3.8 A dedicated sub-group created from the Trafford Assist board members have met and agreed that further work needs to take place to provide extra support to customers submitting repeat applications.

- 3.9 The roll out of UC in Trafford in June 2014 included the request to locally provide personal budgeting support to those claimants identified as needing help managing their money and paying their bills on time as they transition on to UC.
- 3.10 The Trafford Assist team already provides support to vulnerable residents and those with complex needs. The DPA has funded an additional half a post on the Trafford Assist team dedicated to providing personal budgeting support.
- 3.11 The volumetric information provided by the DWP show that an average of 18 referrals per month for PBS is expected during the life of the current DPA (23rd June to 31st March). This equates to one fifth of a post. With the number of referrals much lower than expected in all the existing live sites, the additional resource can be used to support non UC claimants. There is a clause in the DPA which confirms if volumes were to increase then the funding arrangements will be reviewed.
- 3.12 Personal budgeting support is now being offered to all customers who make a repeat application. Combining the expertise and experience within the team will ensure all requests for help will be treated as a positive intervention with a collaborative multi-agency approach Outcomes will be tightly monitored to inform future decision making.

4.0 UC Personal Budgeting Support (PBS) Requirements

- 4.1 PBS is about supporting claimants who need help managing their money adapt to the key changes that UC brings, in particular a monthly household payment inclusive of housing costs.
- 4.2 There are two elements to personal budgeting support:
- * Money advice to help claimants cope with managing their money on a monthly basis and paying their bills on time.
 - * Alternative payment arrangements for some claimants who genuinely cannot manage the standard monthly payment and where there is a risk of financial harm to the claimant or their family. This might include rent paid directly to the landlord, a more frequent than monthly payment, or a split payment between partners.
- 4.3 Money advice will be provided through the additional resource within the Trafford Assist team and fed back to the DWP as required. This management information is fed back monthly.
- 4.4 In addition to the management information relating to UC claimants, the Council will also be reporting on its outcome on PBS for non-UC claimants both to the DWP and internally to establish if the support in place has a positive impact on repeat application demand both in the short and longer term.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 The UC roll out expansion has been determined by the DWP. It is currently live for a very small number of claimants which are those least likely to have complex needs.

- 5.2 The Council's decision to enter in to a DPA with the DWP was based on the fact that it is fully funded and therefore has enabled the Council to provide services to those who most need it without additional cost.
- 5.3 The Trafford Assist team have received additional resource as part of the DPA which will be used to support Trafford residents as well as inform future decision making.
- 5.4 Funding arrangements will be reviewed if there is more demand from the DWP than originally advised.