

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 27 January 2016
Report for: Information
Report of: Executive Member for Finance and Director of Finance

Report Title

Universal Credit Roll Out - Update

Executive Summary

Trafford's first Universal Credit Delivery Partnership Agreement was implemented on 23 June 2014 when Universal Credit was introduced in Trafford. Since then the Council entered in to a further agreement for 2015/16. The Scrutiny Committee requested a report on the impact of the agreement which was presented in July 2014.

As this was only a short time after the initial implementation, the Scrutiny Committee requested a further update on this matter once the new agreement had been operational over a longer period of time. This report details an update on the activity since the DPA was first introduced.

Recommendation(s)

That the Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of this report

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Louise Shaw
Extension: 3120

1.0 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 The purpose of UC is to create a system which strengthens work incentives so that it better supports and encourages work, and reduces benefits complexity, both through its structure and through its approach to delivery.
- 1.3 UC became live in Trafford on the 23 June 2014 for 'new claims'. The eligibility criteria for 'new claims' broadly means single claimants who are out of work but deemed fit for work currently not in receipt of any other welfare benefits.
- 1.4 The DWP invited all of the North West Authorities to provide services that will support the implementation of UC. The support is fully funded by the DWP and is detailed in a Delivery Partnership Agreement (DPA). Trafford Council has agreed to provide support to vulnerable residents claiming UC.
- 1.5 From June 2014 to date the DWP has had a Delivery Partnership Agreement (DPA) in place with the Local Authority to ensure people in such circumstances can readily obtain the support they need to access Universal Credit services and to move closer to and into work wherever possible.
- 1.6 As part of UC the Council has agreed to continue supporting the DWP to be a delivery partner until 31 March 2016 and are currently in discussions to finalise a further agreement for 2016/17.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Since UC was introduced in Trafford up to the end of December 2015, 2,600 Trafford residents have made a claim for UC.
- 2.2 The activities that Trafford Council undertakes on behalf of the DWP are as follows:
 - Management of information – The Council provides specific information on a monthly and 'ad-hoc' basis relating to the numbers of UC cases which have presented to the Local Authority;
 - Governance – Monthly and quarterly review meetings;
 - Provides expertise to UC Service Centre staff on complex housing issues;
 - Supports claimants to get online and stay online;
 - Processes Council Tax Support (CTS) for UC claimants using manual processes;
 - Supports claimants with complex needs and those that require personal budgeting;

- Worked with UC programme in preparing landlords.
- 2.3 Within Exchequer Services, the expertise is available to provide support to the UC Service Centres and carry out the manual processes required for the CTS claims received from UC claimants. The DWP funding has allowed the post holders duties to be filled in order to provide this support.
- 2.4 The DWP based the funding for 2015/16 on an automation process being implemented for CTS in October 2015. Unfortunately delays within the DWP have meant the automated service will be introduced in April 2016. As a result of this additional capacity was required by Trafford Council. The DWP have fully met the cost of this.
- 2.5 Trafford is providing resident's assistance with online access and support in its libraries. Library staffs are trained in assisting residents who are new to computers. The locality of Libraries gives flexibility to residents wishing to apply for UC. The support funded by the DWP is for setting up an email address, registering for Universal Jobmatch and completing the online application form
- 2.6 Personal Budgeting Support (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.
- 2.7 There are two elements to PBS:
- 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.
- 2.8 PBS is currently being provided by Shelter. Shelter is a registered charity providing support and advice for people with regards to housing and homelessness. With regards to PBS for UC claimants in Trafford, they will ensure residents have an understanding of priority debts and are able to budget for bills such as rent, and utilities, to make them ready for monthly UC payments. Guaranteed specialist, expert advice will be provided for UC claimants with more complex needs.
- 3.0 Activity in 2014/2015 and 2015/16 to date**
- 3.1 The activity for UC in Trafford has been lower than estimated. The DWP believe this to be due to the eligibility criteria and the fact that most claimants in this phase of the roll-out are unlikely to have complex needs and/or require online and/or budgeting support.

3.2 The table below breaks down the activity completed from the start date to the end of December 2015, broken down into financial years:

	Online Access	PBS	CTS	LA Expertise to UC Service Centre
2014/15	1	28	105	276
2015/16 (Up to 31 st Dec 2015)	28	11	250	757
TOTAL	29	39	355	1033

3.3 As you can see from the table above, a significant proportion of the resource required by the DWP relates to back office processing as opposed to front line claimant service and/or support.

3.4 All of the online services provided have been to gain access to a computer, claimants have been able to log on and access the service without support.

3.5 The PBS can be broken down further as follows:

	Referrals	Appointments
2014/15	28	8
2015/16 (Up to 31 st Dec 2015)	11	1

	Complex	Simple
2014/15	0	8
2015/16 (Up to 31 st Dec 2015)	0	1

3.6 The majority of PBS referrals have not resulted in an appointment; claimants seeking advice have preferred having a telephone option rather than a face to face appointment. Analysis of the feedback outcome sheet identified that in all PBS cases claimants felt the advice session on money matters helped them feel more confident about managing their money and paying their bills. 100% of claimants said they felt like they were able to manage their money on a monthly basis.

3.7 As the PBS take up has been lower than expected the Council, DWP and Shelter are seeking ways in which to increase awareness of this service with claimants. As a consequence, the DWP agreed to Shelter and a Trafford employee attending a Jobcentre Team Meeting to promote the service. The first refresher course has

been completed in Altrincham and this had an immediate impact, 3 referrals were received on that day. A refresher course for Stretford is now being set up to promote the service further.

- 3.8 To promote all aspects of UC and the services funded through the DPA, the Council organised and participated in 3 Landlord forums alongside DWP colleagues and those partners involved in service delivery. In addition 7 newsletters were created and issued to stakeholders. The Council also made use of a 'benefit bus' which offered mobile advice throughout the Borough. Staffs were on hand to provide general benefit advice as well as assisting residents in preparing for UC.
- 3.9 In addition to the activities detailed in the DPA, the Council have taken the opportunity to identify further areas where joined up working at this stage of the expansion would be beneficial to UC claimants both now and in the future.
- 3.10 The first suggestion was for the DWP to provide training to relevant staff within the Council. The training detailed the claimant journey from making the claim to the assessment. An overview was provided on the Alternative Payment arrangement and time set aside for a Q&A session for staff. It was attended by staff from Access Trafford, Housing Benefits and Client Services. All staff found the training very useful in helping to answer claimant queries and in the processing of UC Discretionary Housing Payments.
- 3.11 Furthermore, the DWP arranged for 2 members of staff to visit the UC Service Centre in Bolton. The visit allowed the members of staff to have an understanding of the processes involved and they were able to ascertain vital contacts. The visit was ideal for establishing a working relationship with the processing centre with the intention of improving service delivery.

4.0 Greater Manchester and Warrington Universal Support Trial

- 4.1 On a larger scale, the Universal Support (US) – delivered locally framework is the product of joint working between DWP and LAAs (Local Authority Associations) to develop an approach that ensures those who need support to make and manage a UC claim receive it. This support is tailored to the needs of the local population and is delivered in partnership between DWP, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and Local Authorities (LAs).
- 4.2 6 LA partnerships (Wigan, Warrington, Oldham, Stockport, Tameside and Trafford) agreed to work together with the local Jobcentres to implement 'Universal Support – delivered locally' scheme.
- 4.3 The aim of the trial is to test through two proposed new delivery models where DWP, LAs and other delivery partners can engage, identify and address complex issues which can be key to improving a person's ability to move in to work and/or to prepare for UC.

4.4 The key themes are:

- Staff cultural shifts - through workforce confidence surveys and qualitative learning interviews with staff the aim was to look at staff awareness, staff reactions to the new delivery model and ways of working, differing experiences across DWP and LAs as well as across the 6 partnerships.
- Customer experience – through customer surveys gauge the reaction and impact of the PBS and online support provided, and seeking customer feedback on the value of joint working of DWP and LAs through the integrated intervention approach.
- Processes and delivery – through sharing and learning sessions with the local partnership groups, looked at learning and development, issues raised, differing experiences across the partnerships, data sharing challenges and opportunities, and the benefits experienced through co-located activities/staff.
- Implementation preparations – review the actual implementation experience against the core implementation action plan to determine achievements, and lessons learnt with a view to inform future implementation efforts.
- Scalability – when addressing the above themes also consider and document key opportunities and challenges that would need to be considered if the new delivery models (or aspects) were to be implemented on a wider scale.

5.4 The trial ended on 30 November 2015. A number of partnerships are interested in continuing to operate elements of the trial however, this will be reliant on a number of issues:

- the appropriate legal framework for data sharing being in place
- commitment of partners to continue local co-location and/or operational arrangements

5.5 It is anticipated that evidence and experience from this bespoke piece of learning will primarily be used to inform:

- DWP UC Test and Learn evaluation.
- Experience of partnerships, co-location and data sharing as part of the final USDL Framework document.
- Strategy colleagues in DWP and DCLG who are working together to articulate Lord Freud's vision of Universal Support.

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 The UC roll out expansion has continued to be determined by the DWP.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 The DPA has been successfully implemented each financial year with the focus on adaptability to change to fit the needs of Trafford UC residents to maximise the service provisions as defined by the DWP via the DPA.
- 6.4 Trafford has been involved in the US trial which is designed to shape the future of UC support on a wider national scale and to be inclusive of the claimants with the most complex needs.

7.0 Recommendation

- That the Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of this report