

SCRUTINY REVIEW UNIVERSAL CREDIT – MEETING WITH CLAIMANTS – 22 JANUARY 2019

Present: Councillors: Una O'Halloran, Rowena Champion, Troy Gallagher, Anjna Khurana, Clare Jeapes

Also Present: Representative of CAB, Mike – Southward Know Your Rights, Terry and Zainab – Islington Know Your Rights

- Members visited the Customer Care Centre to see the facilities on offer to assist claimants in completing their online UC claims. Claimants can scan documents, print them off and get assistance with claims
- Members noted that the Customer Care Centre could issue food vouchers and assist residents under the Resident Support scheme
- From 1 April CAB staff will be located in Job Centres as the DWP will be contracting nationally with CAB to provide support to help people make a claim for UC. Local CAB will be given funding to provide support in their area. Currently; in discussions with Islington CAB and local SWP colleagues to agree how this support will work in LBI, including whether it might be better for residents to base support in 222 Upper Street or the job centres
- The CAB representative stated that as well as being an advisor for the CAB, he had also been a UC claimant. He stated that he was well educated, but he had experienced difficulties and had suffered anxiety and stress as a result of the process
- Whilst advising claimants in Islington he had experienced complex issues for some claimants going over to full service, and all new claimants now had to complete a UC claim
- Claimants also faced problems in providing proof of identity, and providing the appropriate documents, and they usually had to attend an interview at the Job Centre to produce these documents, as it is hard to do this on line
- Claimants were anxious that if they failed to update their UC journal or meet the conditions set out in the journal, there is the threat of sanctions. For instance where a claimant was required to attend an interview with a work coach, there was often very little notice given of meetings and the claimant might not be able to make the meeting at short notice. They risked sanctions if they failed to turn up. Text messages were sent, but there was no way to reply to say that you could not attend and make another appointment. There is also a 5 week waiting period for money from a claim, which led to problems of debt. They have to move from getting paid every 2 weeks to moving to monthly budgeting. It is also difficult for claimants to organise budgeting over a 4 week period, especially if on a low income. There is an option of a loan, however this makes budgeting more difficult in future as the loan has to be repaid from a claimants UC award over a specified period. It was noted that the elderly particularly had difficulties

with budgeting and if money was in their account it was tempting to spend it

- There is an increasing burden placed upon carers by the changing benefits scheme – both DLA to PIP, and UC. They may end up having to do multiple claims both for themselves, and the person they are caring for, with no guarantee of approval, which is very stressful and bound to impact on health and wellbeing of people
- Rent arrears, as a result of UC, were increasing all the time, and although there is an option to pay rent directly to a trusted provider. Where there are rent arrears in the private sector tenants can request an APA, as can private sector landlords, however landlords in the private sector are more likely to evict a tenant who has not paid their rent, due to delays in UC. Social landlords will be prepared to wait until tenant start receiving their UC payments
- If the UC award is sent directly to the claimant there is a temptation for them to spend it on food and clothing for their children, leading to possible rent arrears. There is also financial abuse within relationships, if the payment is made to someone in the household who gambles etc. or there is domestic violence. This presents difficulties in some cases with a partner. However, evidence will need to be provided to the Job Centre from a relevant agency to support the redirection of payment
- It was noted that Barnsbury Job Centre had a notice informing claimants about rent payments. Although a single payment can be made to a household both parties have to agree. DWP is moving to a policy of paying a primary carer but this also has problems as both parties have to agree
- Advance payments have to be repaid and if a claimant had a lot of other reductions and also need to pay back the advance and arrears, then there is less money available
- DWP will not pick up all vulnerable claimants as they are less likely to confide in authority and might be more willing to talk to CAB. Claimants may also not want to talk to the Council, and may be more willing to talk to CAB for debt advice
- It was noted that a UC claim is not straightforward to complete and required yes and no answers, but often it is not as straightforward as this and claimants need to explain circumstances, but have nowhere to do so. Also need to say on form available to work full time but they may not be able to. Some claimants may not be able to ever work full time so discretionary support through the Resident Support scheme will not resolve this longer term issue
- In respect of staff, the CAB had 1 worker based at each of the 2 Job Centres in the borough, however this had now reduced to only 1 for the borough. The CAB were currently receiving funding via the Council, who currently had the contract for providing UC. The CAB initially had a worker based at 222 Upper Street to provide digital support with UC claims, plus a member of staff in each Job Centre Monday to Friday, to provide personal budgeting support. More recently the staff in Job Centres, have had to spend 2 days per week at the CAB to download documents and update the case management system due to technical difficulties with scanning documents in the Job Centres. This has been

raised with DWP and will need to be resolved if the CAB do opt to provide support from April in the Job Centres

- It was noted that whilst the DWP felt that claimants were very satisfied with the service they provided, claimants may fear that if they spoke badly about DWP staff their claim would be jeopardised. It was noted that a claimant's survey was taking place, and the results could be circulated to Members. However, the closing date for completed forms has only just happened so it may be a few weeks before this is available
- Reference was made to the fact that claimants often went to the JCP and were then referred elsewhere, but still do not get help. Claimants often experienced shame in claiming benefits, and this and having to claim often led to anxiety and stress
- A claimant stated that she had experienced problems claiming UC, and that arrears had been deducted from her first payment, which she did not feel was through any fault of her own. She had received a number of letters on arrears, which she had found distressing. She is a carer for her disabled child. Members stated that if claimants were experiencing difficulties with housing payments etc. they should contact their local Ward Councillor
- Council tenants who were in arrears as a result of transferring to UC and the delay in payment are given additional support by the Housing Income Team, to arrange for their rent to be paid and agree a plan for repaying any arrears. Housing will not start chasing recovery of arrears until the tenant has received their first UC payment. However, tenants who are receiving their UC payment and fail to pay their rent or agree a payment plan with the Council will be subject to the recovery process as other tenants. The view was expressed that the Council should do more to publicise this
- It was stated that information could be made available in housing offices, on electronic noticeboards on estates, Councillor ward surgeries and HUBS about UC, with a view to providing information on assistance that could be given to support claimants, as well as advertising self-help groups. Annette Hobart stated that she would look into this,
- Concern was expressed that residents found it extremely difficult to contact the CAB. The CAB stated that they recognised this problem, however the CAB did not receive adequate funding to support residents adequately and that all advice and support organisations were having difficulties coping with the pressures, particularly with UC
- It was noted that it is the intention, apart from a few limited exceptions, to nationally force claimants to complete an online application for UC. The local Job Centres were trying to be more flexible, however nationally sanctions rates for claimants were rising again
- There are also problems in a claimant being able to speak to someone when completing their online claim, if the claim is complicated, and the wrong information on the claim form will affect the award that a claimant receives. There are also problems with verifying ID online and documents do not always scan properly

- Staff in the Job Centre also sometimes issued the wrong advice, and appeals against awards often took time to resolve, which is particularly difficult for claimants and needs to be looked at
- Concern was also expressed at the position with regard to rent arrears in Housing Co-ops and Housing Associations, and there should be a common policy amongst social housing providers on dealing with rent arrears, caused as a result of transferring onto UC. Councillor O'Halloran undertook to raise this with the Executive Member Housing to take up in his discussions with social housing providers. It was also noted that there is no landlord portal available between Partners and DWP for payment of rent and that this issue should also be taken up
- A claimant stated that she had been referred to a food bank, and that she had had to claim UC as her housing benefit had ceased. She had a disabled child and could not work, and had fallen into arrears, as a result of the Bedroom Tax, which she was having to pay off. This made living on the £317 a month she received extremely difficult, and she relied on the food bank. It was noted that only 12 vouchers per year, which is not enough for families in desperate need
- Reference was made to the fact that Discretionary hardship payments can be made to residents, and it was stated that clarity should be provided on this. The Resident support team has a network of partners who can make referrals including community organisations
- Discussion took place as to the fact that there was a large cohort of claimants who were unable to get a job, and the DWP model on UC did not really provide effectively for these claimants. There are also a huge number of carers in the borough who would be affected by UC
- UC is also a problem for residents on zero hours, or where their work situation changed, as it would be difficult to assess their regular income, making it virtually impossible for these claimants to budget effectively. It was felt that the CAB would be seeing more of these types of claimants in the future
- Discussion took place as to those claimants on ESA, and that if you appealed against the refusal of ESA, following a work capability assessment, this could lead to problems with any UC claim submitted. It was felt that more information could be given on this to claimants, and that the ESA/UC systems were not compatible
- Once people move to UC they cannot go back to legacy benefits. This is a particular issue for those on ESA who do their work capability assessment and are judged fit for work
- Most claimants were financially poor and only had access to antiquated IT systems to complete and manage their claim, which made it difficult for them and added to the stress. The provisions around job search required you to search for jobs online, but this is difficult if a claimant is not IT literate or had an old phone etc.
- There is also an automated system for sending letters to claimants, and such letters could be distressing, as the claimant could not discuss communications with a 'real person'
- Reference was made to the fact that the DWP did not operate on borough boundaries, but on postcodes, and that often claimants in the same borough were referred to a job centre in a different borough

