

SUBJECT: UNIVERSAL CREDIT SUPPORT UPDATE

REPORT BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE & TOWN CLERK

LEAD OFFICER: MARTIN WALMSLEY, HEAD OF SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update with regard to Universal Credit support, particularly in respect of arrangements for 2019/20.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 A proactive and holistic approach to Universal Credit support has been in place within our shared service, since Full Service rollout at Lincoln Jobcentre Plus in March 2018, then at Sleaford Jobcentre Plus in November 2018.
- 2.2 A central government decision has resulted in a national contract for Citizens Advice to deliver Universal Credit support for the financial year 2019/20. This report sets out current arrangements in City of Lincoln and North Kesteven.

3. Background

- 3.1 Our shared service has been involved in various Universal Credit (UC) support projects and trials since October 2013, including a successful national trial as part of the West Lincolnshire arrangements (also involving West Lindsey District Council).
- 3.2 Since 7th March 2018, when UC Full Service rolled out in Lincoln Jobcentre Plus, a UC support team within our shared service has been in operation in Lincoln, then further expanded to a presence based at Sleaford – when UC Full Service was rolled out in Sleaford Jobcentre Plus from 14th November 2018.
- 3.3 In the financial year 2018/19, this internal UC support team assisted customers as shown in the tables below:

Assisted Digital Support (ADS)

	No. Customers Supported		Average monthly award per customer (£)	
	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven
New UC claim	676	108	£439,400	£70,330
Council Tax Support Claim	198	43	£14,298	£3,131
Other elements	869	185	£31,952	£6,894
Total	1,743	336	£485,650	£80,355

In terms of ADS, although the internal UC support team assisted customers to claim, it is possible that the customer may have still made their claim and/or sought assistance elsewhere. However, if not there would be risks around underclaiming of UC, which could result in personal debt, rent arrears, Council Tax arrears, etc.

Personal Budgeting Support (PBS)

	No. Customers Supported		Average monthly value of income maximisation per customer (£)	
	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven	City of Lincoln	North Kesteven
Advance payment	135	36	£87,490	£23,205
Discretionary Housing Payment Award	118	30	£7,618	£1,945
Other benefits	37	9	£7,970	£2,030
Alternative Payment Arrangement	57	14	£39,480	£9,818
Housing Solution Referral	12	3	£7,116	£1,750
Food voucher	36	11	£720	£228
Appeal / reconsideration	6	2	£3,965	£910
Rent Arrears	29	10	£20,119	£7,097
Other elements	392	110	£29,915	£9,555
Total	822	225	£204,393	£56,538

3.4 This internal team has achieved notable outcomes for customers, being described by local Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as 'flagship'. The team was also a key component of a prestigious national award for 'Excellence in Partnership Working' (Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation Performance Awards 2018).

3.5 On 1st October 2018, a surprise announcement by central government stated that a national contract with Citizens Advice to deliver UC support would be in place for the financial year 2019/20.

4. 2019/20 'Help to Claim' arrangements

4.1 Citizens Advice is contracted to deliver a new regime of UC support arrangements from 1st April 2019, known as 'Help to Claim'. These arrangements are to support UC customers with a focus on digital assistance, up to and including first payment of UC only. Therefore, the contracted arrangement does not cover the wide range of activities delivered by our shared service's UC Support Team – key areas as shown in the table at paragraph 3.3 of this report. Therefore, these new arrangements are a reduction in the level of UC support services to our customers, with resulting key risks, such as:

- Customers not claiming Council Tax Support (CTS);
- Rent arrears (including for local authority tenants) increasing due to no direct link with landlords/ local authority housing departments;
- Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) cases not identified, claimed nor processed.

- 4.2 Mid Lincolnshire Citizens Advice, which includes a Sleaford based office, progressed Help to Claim arrangements to be in place from 1st April 2019. In addition to this, senior officers at North Kesteven District Council made an internal decision to retain a Sleaford-based UC support function from our shared service for 2019/20, with a review to take place in advance of 2020/21 with the potential to extend for another year too. This effectively continues the UC support function already provided at North Kesteven offices in Sleaford, co-located with Jobcentre Plus. However, key links and communication with Citizens Advice is crucial to ensure effective referrals for CTS, DHP, rent issues etc – with the initial ‘Help to Claim’ being delivered from Citizens Advice in Sleaford.
- 4.3 Lincoln & District Citizens Advice expressed a desire to subcontract Help to Claim arrangements to our shared service for a number of reasons, including due to the success of the incumbent team. However, a change in national stance meant that in March 2019 this submitted expression was declined by National Citizens Advice. Arrangements have been put in place for our shared service’s UC Support Team based in Lincoln to continue support arrangements for the period 1st April to 30th June 2019 – to allow Lincoln & District Citizens Advice to recruit and have supported training with the aim of achieving a successful revised arrangement from 1st July 2019. There remains key risks around matters such as rent arrears, CTS and DHP not being claimed under Citizens Advice led support arrangements, as well as issues such as customers who continue to require assistance following their first payment of UC – which is not covered under Help to Claim.
- 4.4 Officers are currently working through a number of options regarding potential Lincoln-based internal UC support arrangements, to be considered in advance of 1st July 2019. North Kesteven Members of Revenues and Benefits Joint Committee would need to be aware of arrangements as North Kesteven residents will be affected by any decision made – i.e. those who live in postcodes coming under Lincoln Jobcentre Plus in City Hall. DWP will need to ‘sign-off’ any proposed arrangement from 1st July 2019.
- 4.5 An update on Help to Claim/ UC support arrangements and statistics to date will be provided verbally at this Committee on 3rd June, to relay the most up-to-date position.

5. Organisational Impacts

- 5.1 Finance:
Central Government funding for UC Support and other UC-related matters for 2018/19, is shown in the table below:

DWP Funding – UC and UC Support 2018/19	COLC	NKDC	Total
	£	£	£
Personal Budgeting Support	11,131	5,384	16,515
Assisted Digital Support	5,692	2,753	8,445
Additional Q1 Funding	12,826	4,996	17,822
Additional Q2 Funding	13,041	1,372	14,413
Additional Q3 Funding	15,112	3,739	18,851
Projected Additional Q4 Funding	15,000	3,500*	18,500*
UC FS HB Stop Notice	400	400	800

UC FS LCTR Automation	908	908	1,816
Transition to UC Housing Payment	17,195	4,472	21,667
Removal of Temporary Accommodation from UC	529	293	822
Total	91,834	27,817	119,651

*Figures not yet released by DWP, estimates based on internal local authority information.

The cost of our shared service staffing for UC support 2018/19, is shown below:

UC Support Team salaries 2018/19	COLC	NK	Total
	£	£	£
UC Support Officer (SC5) – 2.65FTE @ Lincoln and 1FTE @ North Kesteven	73,038	27,561	100,599
Apprentice – 1FTE	9,225	0	9,225
Total	82,263	27,561	109,824

Staff undertaking UC support were not backfilled during 2018/19, which impacted on claims processing.

There is no UC support funding available for local authorities in 2019/20.

Lincoln & District Citizens Advice have agreed a payment of £8,000 for our shared service to support the transition to Help to Claim for the period 1st April to 30th June 2019.

5.2 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

5.3 There are no equality and diversity implications as a direct result of this report.

6. Risk Implications

6.1 Where robust arrangements are not in place to deliver support for customers claiming Universal Credit, there could be increased adverse impacts on matters such as; rent arrears, Council Tax income and residents' digital and financial inclusion.

7. Recommendation

7.1 Members are recommended to note and comment regarding this update on Universal Credit support arrangements.

Key Decision No

Do the Exempt Information Categories Apply? No

Call in and Urgency: Is the decision one to which Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules apply?

No

How many appendices does the report contain?

None

List of Background Papers:

None

Lead Officer:

Martin Walmsley, Shared Revenues and Benefits Manager
Telephone 01522 873597