

SUBJECT: WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND TPWN CLERK

LEAD OFFICER: CLAIRE MOSES, REVENUES AND BENEFITS MANAGER

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide Joint Committee with an update regarding the national and local position of welfare reform, with a specific focus on the local advice referral process and Covid-19 support for this particular report.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides Joint Committee with an update on national Universal Credit changes; to include reference to the national statistics and national legislation changes.

The report will also provide Joint Committee with an update regarding local advice referral into the Welfare Reform Support team.

The report will also provide Joint Committee with an update regarding the national and local changes made to support those financially adversely affected by Covid-19.

3. Background

- 3.1 Reports will provide Joint Committee with an up to date position on the following:

- National UC Progress - statistics;
- National legislation changes; and
- Background Papers.

4. National Progress – Statistics

- 4.1 Latest figures published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were released on 16 July 2020, with statistics relevant to the period up to 11th June 2020.

- 5,461,352 households receiving UC (this is an increase from 3,020,129 as reported at the last meeting of this Committee)

Local authority statistics are also available as at 14th May 2020: -

- City of Lincoln – 9,859
- North Kesteven – 6,419.

5. Advice Referrals to Welfare Reform Support Team

- 5.1 The referrals come from many service areas within the Councils, customers and external stakeholders into the Shared Service Welfare Reform Support team (formerly Universal Support Team). **Appendix 1** shows the areas referrals are received from, along with details of the point of referral.
- 5.2 Since 27th January 2020, the Welfare Reform Support team have received 575 referrals. The table below shows the first point of contact and where these referrals have been received from: -

Benefits	89
Citizens Advice	27
Customer	100
Customer Services	66
DWP	28
Hospital	8
Housing	170
Housing Solutions (Council)	3
Housing Solutions (Private)	39
Parking	3
Private Landlord	9
Recovery	1
Voids	5
Welfare	1
TOTAL	575

- 5.3 The advice referral process has resulted in all internal teams and partners working together with the objective of improving the customer journey. Financial outcomes for these customers will be mapped and an update will be provided at the next meeting of this committee.
- 5.4 As a result of Covid-19, the Welfare Reform Support team has been able to provide vital support to new and existing customers – both over the phone and via email. The team are able to explain customers what support is available to them (national and local), undertake assessments for Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments.

The team also provide advice and guidance to the Revenues and Benefits staff regarding changes to legislation.

6. Covid-19 National Support for Customers Affected

- 6.1 As a result of the outbreak of Covid-19, there have been a number of changes made to legacy benefits, Universal Credit and support for those in or retaining employment. These announcements are detailed in **Appendix 2**.

6.2 Covid-19 Shared Service Support for Customers Affected

It is important that the shared service can respond quickly to the national changes to support those affected by COVID-19. In doing so, Revenues and Benefits Senior Management have ensured all staff are aware of these changes and have provided guidance to staff. This is shown in **Appendix 3**.

The guidance explains the changes, along with how they are to be implemented for shared service customers. The guidance also allows for local decisions to be recorded in relation to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. The guidance is updated regularly and included on the internal Revenues and Benefits guidance manual.

7. Strategic Priorities

7.1 **City of Lincoln: Let's Reduce all Kinds of Inequality, and North Kesteven: Our Economy and Our Community:** An understanding of Universal Credit and its wider impacts on City of Lincoln residents and arrears levels is important when reducing poverty and driving economic growth across the City. The aim of Universal Credit is to provide a simplified means tested benefits system, with the objective of avoiding the 'poverty trap', where there is a disincentive to work longer hours because of the loss of benefits and higher taxes.

7.2 **City of Lincoln: Let's Reduce all Kinds of Inequality, and North Kesteven: Our Economy and Our Community:** - A key role in reducing inequality by ensuring residents receive the benefits they are entitled to and providing money / debt advice. There are strategic priorities when engaging with those in receipt of Welfare Benefits, Digital Inclusion, Channel Shift/ Customer Experience, Financial Inclusion and Partnership Working are all key priorities as part of this report.

8. Organisational Impacts

8.1 **Finance:** There are no direct financial implications arising as a result of this report.

8.2 **Legal implications inc Procurement Rules:**

There are no direct Legal or Procurement implications arising from this report.

9. Risk Implications

9.1 The Councils bear the risk of local authority rent arrears which are not fully recovered.

10. Recommendation

10.1 That Joint Committee notes this report – and that an update will be presented at the next meeting of this Committee.

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

Does the report contain Appendices? Yes

If Yes, how many Appendices? Appendix 1: Welfare Support – advice referrals
Appendix 2: Covid-19 National support
Appendix 3: Covid-19 Shared Service Support

List of Background Papers: No

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