

## **Universal Credit Scrutiny Feedback June 2019**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 From 20 June 2018 the Borough of Islington went full service for Universal Credit claims. This means all new claimants, and those residents that have a change in circumstance will move to Universal Credit (UC). UC is paid direct to residents rather than to their landlord. It was expected that the change would result in higher rent arrears.
- 1.2 The number of Partners residents in receipt of UC is steadily increasing. Since November 2018 an average of 27 residents have transferred each month. Around 377 Partners residents are in now receipt of UC.
- 1.3 Average arrears across Islington for those receiving UC is around 4 times higher than those in receipt of Housing Benefit.
- 1.4 Partners want to support residents in receipt of UC to manage their finances so that they can pay their rent and arrears.
- 1.5 Partners have a rent collection KPI to meet.
- 1.6 This scrutiny exercise reviewed the support and information offered to residents in receipt of UC to ensure that Partners are maximising opportunities to support residents.

### **2 Involvement**

- 2.1 Residents were invited to participate in the scrutiny exercise through Partners Gazette, Partners Engagement Register and Partners Open Forum. Residents currently in receipt of UC with the highest arrears were contacted directly.
- 2.2 Two residents volunteered, although they were not in receipt of Universal Credit.
- 2.3 Resident views and experiences were obtained through an Islington survey carried out by London Unemployed Strategies – a claimant peer support network.
- 2.4 Partners Accounts Team Leader was interviewed.
- 2.5 Partners Open Forum was consulted.

### **3 Activity**

- 3.1 Resident volunteers benchmarked the information available on Partners website against 4 other housing providers. Their feedback was:
  - Include links to 3<sup>rd</sup> parties detailed in the text



- Add information and support details on how to cope during the first 5 weeks when no UC payment will be made
  - Link to helpful videos provided by Shelter and The Money Manager Advice service
  - Include information for 16/17 year olds
  - Include a checklist of information needed to complete online claims
  - Provide details of the 'claimant commitment'.
- 3.2 Details of Universal Credit in Islington and the measures already in place to support Partners residents were shared at Partners Open Forum on 16 May 2019. Residents were asked to feedback on any additional ideas or areas for improvement. Residents did not identify any additional support to be included.
- 3.3 The London Unemployed Strategies research was analysed. It identified the main concern which Partners could influence was the availability of computers to update residents' claims.
- 3.4 Partners Accounts Team Leader was interviewed. She explained the support in place for residents receiving UC, and shared details of the numbers of residents receiving UC and the volume of arrears.

## 4 Update

- 4.1 Partners website was updated in April 2019 following the recommendations made by the resident volunteers. Full details can be found at [www.partnersislington.net/universal-credit](http://www.partnersislington.net/universal-credit). Following the changes the number of hits on the UC section of the website increased from 42 between February 2019 and April 2019 to 81 between April 2019 and May 2019.
- 4.2 Partners Accounts Team provides the following support for residents in receipt of UC:
- The Accounts Team Leader works closely with Islington Council to help residents in receipt of UC. Managers and support staff meet monthly to review the status of claimants and consider help that can be offered. Processes have been agreed and a UC 'hub' has been established at 222 Upper Street where residents can access computers to update their online UC applications, get help to make a claim, and services to help them with personal budgeting such as Citizen's Advice . When communicating with our residents we always remind them to access these facilities.
  - In addition Partners has a Successful Tenancies Advisor (STA) available to residents to help maximise their income along with

reducing debts and living costs. The STA provides resident workshops, and regularly meets with others working in the sector to share good practice.

- At sign up, residents in receipt of UC are offered an appointment with Partners STA. They are also asked if they need support until they receive their first UC payment.
- When Partners are notified that a resident has made a claim for UC they are sent a letter (appendix 1) which explains UC, what it means for them, and the support available. It signposts them to the specialist services and computer availability at 222 Upper Street. They are also offered additional support in the form of Islington's Resident Support Scheme and Foodbank vouchers.
- When residents fall into arrears Partners staff follow the arrears process which offers support to help clear debts and manage their rent account. We refer residents to many support agencies including ageUK, SHP, Citizens Advice, Help on Your Doorstep, IMAX and IWORK.

## 5 Conclusion

This scrutiny review has found that Partners Accounts Team have robust processes in place to support residents on UC. They work closely with Islington Council and other 3<sup>rd</sup> parties to provide support. As soon as a resident starts claiming UC, Partners Accounts Team intervenes and is there to provide support and make referrals on an ongoing basis. Continued achievement of Partners rent collection KPI demonstrates that the support measures are working.

The review did identify improvement opportunities for Partners website which has been updated to offer more information and guidance. Improvements have been demonstrated by the increase in hits since the changes.

As the UC roll out continues, resident support, rent payments and rent arrears will continue to be reviewed at monthly meetings with Islington Council and within Partners. New strategies for supporting residents will continue to be considered and implemented where agreed with the impact and effectiveness for residents and landlords being reviewed.



## **Appendix 1**

Dear

### **What you need to know about moving to Universal Credit.**

We are writing to you because the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has informed us about your claim for Universal Credit.

Universal Credit is a big change from any benefits or tax credits you may get now, and you need to be ready to manage your claim differently. This letter sets out the main things that will be different for you, and provides information about where to get help and advice if you need it.

### **You need to claim Council Tax Support separately.**

Universal Credit does not include help with your Council Tax. If you did not claim Council Tax Reduction when you made your claim for Universal Credit, you must claim Council Tax support separately, from the council.

Visit [www.islington.gov.uk/council-tax](http://www.islington.gov.uk/council-tax)

### **You will be responsible for paying your rent.**

You will be responsible for paying your rent directly to your landlord yourself. If you were receiving Housing Benefit previously, you should receive a further 2 weeks Housing Benefit payments and then your Housing Benefit will stop. There is at least a five-week delay between applying for Universal Credit and getting your first payment, so you will need to start thinking about what you need to do now.

If your rent is not paid for whatever reason Partners will follow the rent arrears procedure, which means you could lose your home.

If you are having difficulties paying your rent, or falling into arrears, contact your Account Advisor, or local advice agencies for help and support.

### **You will need to manage your budget.**

You will need to budget so you can pay your rent and council tax and your other living costs every month. Setting up direct debits or standing orders with your bank, can help you prioritise your payments.

Universal Credit is paid in arrears on a monthly basis. You can apply for an advance payment, which is repayable over 12 months, to help cover the delay between applying for Universal Credit and getting your first payment.

If you need help with budgeting, speak to your work coach at the job centre who can help you



get independent advice or us and we can arrange an appointment with our Successful Tenancies Advisor.

### **You will need to manage your Universal Credit online.**

Most people will be expected to manage their Universal Credit claim online, so you will need internet access. You will need to keep the DWP updated about your circumstances – you are responsible for this and it can affect your payments.

If you need access to a computer, they are available at your local job centre, in libraries or at the Customer Centre, 222 Upper Street. If you want to improve your computer skills, you can do an Adult and Community Learning course. Visit [www.adultlearning.islington.gov.uk](http://www.adultlearning.islington.gov.uk)

### **What happens next?**

Once you have made your claim online, you will be contacted by a Work Coach to attend your local Job Centre. Once you have met with your Work Coach and signed the Claimant Commitment, you will be provided with support to apply for jobs and training.

### **Getting advice and support.**

If you have any questions about Universal Credit, you should contact the Universal Credit helpline: 0800 328 5644 open Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm.

For help and advice to manage your living costs, or to find independent advice agencies in Islington, visit [www.islington.gov.uk/universalcredit](http://www.islington.gov.uk/universalcredit) or [www.partnersislington.net/universal-credit](http://www.partnersislington.net/universal-credit).

You can also speak to your Account Advisor, who can help put you in touch with local advice agencies.

Yours sincerely

Account Advisor

