

National Housing Federation and the Department for Work and Pensions

Universal Credit Monthly Meeting – Manchester - 23 May 2014

Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the National Housing Federation, alongside its member housing associations, have worked closely together since the start of Universal Credit (UC) in April 2013. This has involved regular dialogue and monthly meetings to exchange information and deal with operational matters as they develop. At the regular meeting on 23 May Tim Read (UC Programme Delivery Manager), Mike Baker (UC Operations Director) and James Wolfe (UC Programme Policy Lead) joined to take stock with colleagues on progress to date. The meeting was chaired by Daniel Klemm for the National Housing Federation.

Working together to support the delivery of Universal Credit

The DWP is utilising a 'test and learn' approach to the implementation of Universal Credit. The Federation commented that they are supportive of this careful and incremental approach to delivery and agreed that the housing association experience is an important part of the testing and trialling of Universal Credit.

Since the start of the pathfinder, DWP have introduced incremental improvements as part of their commitment to continuous improvement. These adjustments are a standard part of the approach they have in place since last year and reflect DWPs on-going commitment to responsible project management.

During the meeting we discussed these practical adjustments, which have strengthened the Universal Credit offer for claimants and landlords. They include:-

- setting up a dedicated team in the Service Centre to manage housing and Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) cases;
- provision of single point of contact details to local authorities and social landlords such as housing associations through a dedicated phone line;
- better designed and simpler notifications and forms;
- a new dedicated external e-mail address for social landlords, enabling them to escalate request for APAs and deductions for arrears in cases where they are considering formal pre-eviction action;
- seconding a local authority housing benefit expert to the Universal Credit Service Centre;
- setting up a dedicated network of named contacts within in each local authority within current Live Running Sites and North West areas which commence in June 2014.

The majority of claims that involve housing payments are transitioning safely to UC without the need for APAs, and we have ensured safeguards are in place to protect both landlords and tenants under the new system.

Mike also told colleagues that the team had been reviewing all current APA cases to make sure they were accurate and up to date – and had confirmed that they were. Housing Associations were asked to contact the team if they had any outstanding issues that DWP were unaware of.

We agreed that the key focus in the short term is to make sure that communication between practitioners in Universal Credit Operations, social landlords, local authorities and Universal Credit claimants is clear and issues can be spotted, raised and resolved swiftly. Colleagues from two of the housing associations commented that they had seen even greater improvement in the response to their requests for APAs to be set up and were discussing further improvements via weekly review calls with the Service Centre team. We agreed to continue to monitor the overall process and individual cases closely to make sure this outcome is achieved.

The Federation and housing associations explained they are keen to continue to work closely with DWP and offered to:

- contribute to the test and learning of processes through regular joint forums;
- share the experiences of both housing associations and tenants of Universal Credit to help continually improve processes;
- help prepare housing associations across England for Universal Credit, through briefings and knowledge transfer. The Federation will be hosting events in June/July to inform and prepare housing associations operating outside of the current Live Running Sites; and
- facilitate further training for DWP staff to build on their existing understanding of housing associations and the needs of tenants within the context of Universal Credit.

Conclusion

The Federation and the DWP agreed that continued joint working is important to support the successful delivery of Universal Credit. We will continue to do so via meetings between the Federation and the DWP.

Tim Reed
Department for Work and Pensions
29 May 2014

Daniel Klemm
National Housing Federation
29 May 2014