

I. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a range of measures to reform the way in which benefits are delivered including the introduction of Universal Credit (UC). 4 years on, the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 was established with further changes which aims to reward work and back aspiration, provide £12bn of national benefit savings and it is expected that by 2020, 8 out of 10 people will be better off.
- 1.2 UC replaces six key benefits: Housing Benefit; Job Seeker Allowance; Employment and Support Allowance; Child and Working Tax Credits and Income Support. It is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- 1.3 UC claimants maintain a relationship with Job Centre Plus to direct in-work progression of both hours and wages.
- 1.4 In November 2015, it was announced that reductions to in-work allowances would take effect from April 2016. Analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (February 2016) suggested there will be winners and losers; overall, 3.2m will see lower benefit entitlements an average loss £1,800 a year and 2.2m gaining an average of £1,400 a year.
- 1.5 The Director General of the UC programme for the Department for Work and Pensions wrote to all local authority chief executives at the beginning of October 2017, following concerns widely reported in the media that claimants were experiencing substantial delays in receiving their first UC housing cost payment thereby placing them in rent arrears. The full letter is included in Appendix A.

2. PLYMOUTH ROLL-OUT

- 2.1 UC (Live Service) began in Plymouth in January 2016 for new, single, JSA claimants. Figures for September 2016 were 1,679 claimants and 12 months later in September 2017 there were 1,783 claimants.
- 2.2 UC (Full Service) started in Plymouth on 11 October 2017. Full Service is available to all new, eligible claimants rather than simply for single customers without children. UC (Full Service) is being rolled out by postcode areas between October 2017 and January 2018. For the timetable see Appendix B. As a result of UC being available to more customers, the numbers claiming will increase significantly. DWP predict that 5% of claimants will need support for their UC claim and provided the following predictions to PCC:

2017/18	Q1			Q1 Total	Q2			Q2 Total	Q3			Q3 Total	Q4			Q4 Total
	April	May	June		July	Aug	Sep		Oct	Nov	Dec		Jan	Feb	March	
ADS	10	18	19	47	14	18	19	51	102	157	116	375	134	124	113	371
PBS	21	22	22	65	10	10	12	32	103	159	120	382	133	117	104	354

2.3 DWP benefit data is publically available and can be accessed in a number of ways, including via [Stat-Xplore](#). Data from Stat-Xplore for September 2017 provides the following intelligence about Plymouth claimants:

Number of people of Universal Credit by Ward

Ward	Sep-17
Budshead	88
Compton	85
Devonport	191
Drake	85
Efford & Lipson	117
Eggbuckland	48
Ham	90
Honicknowle	109
Moor View	46
Peverell	52
Plympton Chaddlewood	15
Plympton Erle	23
Plympton St. Mary	44
Plymstock Dunstone	45
Plymstock Radford	40
Southway	78
St. Budeaux	121
St. Peter & the Waterfront	214
Stoke	127
Sutton & Mount Gould	163
Grand Total	1783

Number of people on Universal Credit by age group

Age group	Sep-17
16- 24	727
25-49	741
50+	143
Total	1783

* Note. DWP Rounding impacts totals

2.4 Between 11 and 25 October 2017, there were 82 claims under UC (Full Service).

3. UC SUPPORT

- 3.1 Plymouth City Council signed a Universal Credit Delivery Partnership agreement with DWP in January 2016, to provide UC claimants with personal budgeting support (PBS) and assisted digital support (ADS). DWP predict that 5% of all UC claimants will need this support. The current agreement ends in March 2018.
- 3.2 PBS is available for UC claimants who are identified as in need of help to manage their finances. Primarily, referrals are made via DWP work coaches from a Plymouth Job Centre and PCC have contracted Advice Plymouth to provide this service. It has been particularly successful when appointments are offered in the Job Centres and the debt adviser from Advice Plymouth has worked hard with DWP staff at the Job Centres to provide an extremely valuable service.
- 3.3 ADS is available for UC claimants who are unable to use a computer and have no one who could help them. This is an important service as all UC claims must be made online. This service is offered from Plymouth Libraries and is provided by PCC Customer Advisors. The appointment slot offered is long enough to support the customer to make a claim for Council Tax Support as well as their UC claim. This is one of the steps PCC has taken to support potentially financially vulnerable UC claimants at an early stage. Customer Advisors are also able to refer the customer for PBS if in the course of the appointment they have concerns that the customer needs further support in managing their household budget.
- 3.4 In the run up to the start of UC (Full Service) roll out in October, PCC worked in partnership with local DWP colleagues to support other organisations who could identify customers early who may need UC support. A number of those agencies have expressed a desire to access this referral route for PBS and ADS and have been set up to do so. PCC developed a simple, web-based single point of entry system that all referral partners now use. It also collates the management information that PCC must submit quarterly to DWP in accordance with the partnership agreement.
- 3.5 PCC administers a number of discount and grant schemes to help customers in financial need. They include council tax support, various council tax discounts and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). DHP may be used to support UC claimants who are eligible for the housing cost element. There are a variety of ways that this fund may be used, including to clear rent arrears in order to maintain a tenancy and prevent homelessness. This may mitigate against a situation where a UC claimant experiences a delay in payment and falls behind with their rent. Front facing PCC staff, landlords and other local organisations have been reminded of the schemes available during engagement events that have been held in the run up to UC (Full Service) roll out.
- 3.6 UC is a significant change and whilst it is not a benefit that PCC administer, our front facing staff must be able to confidently and professionally support and signpost customers wherever they present. We work closely with our local DWP partners to support the UC implementation programme and as part of that have supported a number of local events for social landlords, private sector landlords, PCC staff, DWP staff and voluntary sector organisations.