MINUTES OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND WELFARE REFORM TASK GROUP
4TH JUNE 2014

PRESENT:

Members of the Task Group:
Councillors Mahoney (Chairman), Ms Edwards, Mrs Garcia, Mrs New, and Helen Walton.

Officers:
Dave Wortley (Benefits Manager), Liz Dunlop (Operational Housing Manager), Debbie Dawson (Scrutiny Officer) and Claire Waleczek (Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer).

Also in attendance:
Councillor Leigh Hunt (Sustainable Inclusive Communities Portfolio Holder)
Jeremy Murphy, Work Services Manager, Department for Works and Pensions
Sue Gaskell, Work Services Manager, Department for Works and Pensions
David Kerr, Work Coach, Department for Works and Pensions

32. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22\textsuperscript{nd} January 2104 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

33. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence from the meeting was received from Councillor Roodhouse.

34. IMPLEMENTATION OF WELFARE REFORM IN THE BOROUGH – QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM LOCAL JOBCENTRE PLUS OFFICE

Please note: these minutes are a record of the discussion. Comments recorded do not necessarily represent the views of the task group, the council, or the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Task Group received evidence from representatives from the local Jobcentre Plus office concerning the implementation of welfare reform and its impact on their clients within the borough.

During a question and answer session, the following points were made.

- Universal Credit had been implemented in Rugby in November 2013 on a phased basis, initially to single people with no dependents within a limited postcode area.
- The implementation had been successful with the limited claimants involved. Both claimants and Jobcentre Plus had found Universal Credit beneficial as it motivated claimants to look for work.
Universal Credit worked well for the high numbers of casual warehouse and agency workers in the borough, as it is based on real time information provided by employers and claimants are not required to 'sign off' when their employment reaches a particular level.

Take-up of Universal Credit in Rugby had been lower than expected.

It was emphasised that Universal Credit was still in a testing stage. Rugby Jobcentre was working with other pathfinders to feed back their experiences and refine processes.

Application process

Jobcentre Plus in Rugby had put measures in place when Universal Credit was implemented for any vulnerable new claimants to be supported by the local authority with the application process. However, to date this had not been required.

Within the JCP there are PCs available for claimants to use. Staff were trained and available to help any claimant experiencing problems claiming online.

Some claimants had experienced problems understanding terminology within the application process. These issues had been fed back to the national project group for Universal Credit and changes had already been made to rectify this matter.

Claimants who had undertook to find background information prior to applying online would be aware of personal data they would require to be able to make an application eg looking at Government website, contacting Jobcentre Plus.

Once a claimant had made an online application, they would receive a telephone call from the DWP service centre to arrange an appointment for them at their local Jobcentre Plus office. The claimant would meet a 'personal account advisor, who would go through their commitment statement and evidence ID required. The advisor would provide guidance on the claimant’s first payment and identify if this caused any issues with hardship. Normally, a claimant’s first payment would be received five weeks after their on-line application was completed. The claimant would then see a Work Coach who would establish a ‘claimant commitment’, setting out agreed requirements for looking for work, training etc. This was normally 35 hours per week but was tailored to the individual’s personal circumstances – so, for example, would be less onerous for someone with learning disabilities. The claimant would also be offered monetary advice and be signposted to this Council if required.

An online process gave Jobcentre Plus staff more time to allocate to claimants and help them with finding work etc.

Conditionality and use of sanctions locally

The local Jobcentre Plus office followed national standards for the imposition of sanctions.

Claimants, as part of their commitment, undertake to attend training sessions for improved job skills, interviews etc. They are obliged to meet these commitments unless they have a valid reason for non-attendance.

If a doubt was raised concerning a claimant’s commitment, they would have an opportunity to put their reasons forward. A separate decision maker would assess all of the information and make a judgement as to whether the benefit claim should continue. The claimant would have a right of appeal if the claim was ceased.

Under Universal Credit, claimants were very aware of expectations and it was ensured that any agreements made on the Claimant Commitment were clear. Jobcentre Plus staff were keen that claimants were not set up to fail. There was the opportunity to review and amend the commitment if it was proving to be too challenging. The commitment focused on tackling barriers to work – for example, if someone had no fixed abode, the commitment would initially focus on them finding a home.
• Any claimant who was sanctioned could apply for hardship funding with Jobcentre Plus. However, they would have to commit to re-engage in the process. Any claim under this fund would be processed as a matter of urgency.
• Sanctions were monitored to ensure that they are appropriate.

Communication about existing changes to existing claimants

• Work Coaches were talking to current claimants regarding transferring to Universal Credit and were beginning to move existing claimants towards a routine of spending 35 hours per week preparing for and seeking work. All staff were trained to provide information on this.
• Interpreters were available for claimants who did not speak English as a first language. However, training was offered to them for speaking English to help remove any barriers to work.

Patterns of employment

• There were no official statistics available locally as yet, but the Work Coach stated there is anecdotal evidence to suggest a higher proportion of Universal Credit claimants are going into work compared to those on Job Seekers Allowance.
• Claimants were supported to undertake better quality job searches and to prepare CVs with good skills match that would move them into work quickly. Feedback from employment agencies suggested that claimants were now more active in their search for work.
• An example was given of to demonstrate how Universal Credit ensured that individuals were better off in work. A claimant may accept an 8 hour shift when it was demonstrated that under the new rules they could be around £150 per month better off as a result, compared to a claimant who was in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance. This initial work can sometimes lead to a gradual increase in hours worked until the claimant is working full-time.
• In Rugby there were a number of organisations where the Jobcentre could refer individuals for training, including Intec Business College, Warwickshire College, the Benn Partnership Centre and sector-based work academies.
• Claimants who decided to become self-employed received on-going mentoring support to ensure the business was continuing to be viable and profitable. They also received New Enterprise Allowance for the first 26 weeks of their business.

Training for community and voluntary sector frontline workers in partnership with DWP

• Council officers were due to hold a joint meeting with DWP and community organisations regarding training for their voluntary staff on Universal Credit. Partnership working was now progressing through the new Rugby Financial Inclusion Partnership.

35. IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM IN RUGBY – LATEST POSITION ON THE DATA MEASURES AGREED BY THE TASK GROUP

The Task Group considered a report (agenda item 5) on the latest position on data measures which it had agreed to monitor.

Further to the report, the following additional points were made.
Universal Credit

• Universal Credit roll out to couples was due to commence by the end of June 2014. No confirmed date had been issued yet. Families would be phased into Universal Credit in the autumn.
• Rugby Borough Council was currently delivering support for vulnerable claimants itself but was working to involve the voluntary and community sector. Warwickshire County Council was considering whether to take a lead on this on a county-wide basis as part of the national framework from April 2015.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

• The report scheduled to go to Cabinet in June would now be delayed until its August meeting, with consultation being undertaken in September. The scheme would need to be approved by full council by January 2015.
• The Benefits Manager would query the increase in summons (compared with stable collection rates) with the Council Tax Manager and report back to the Task Group.
• The council had predicted a 1% reduction in collection rates, but there had only been a 0.5% reduction.

The Task Group discussed the relevance of some of the data measures within the report. It had not been possible to find a more meaningful way of measuring rent arrears without a lengthy manual process.

It was agreed that the following measures no longer be regularly reported to the task group meetings:

(i) Tracking of 40 customers affected by Council Tax Reduction Scheme
(ii) Council Rent Arrears
(iii) Case Studies

36. WORK PROGRAMME AND DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Task Group agreed a future programme of work as detailed below.

(i) September meeting regarding consultation on the Council Tax Discretionary Scheme.
(ii) Autumn meeting to review evidence collected and the way forward, particularly identifying any key areas of welfare reform to investigate in more detail.

CHAIRMAN