

POLICY & RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4TH DECEMBER 2014

AGENDA ITEM 6 – UNIVERSAL CREDIT (SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE)

To assist Members in their Scrutiny of this item, the following supplementary note has been prepared.

1. Job Centre Plus staff presence in Civic 1 reception

During the transition to Universal Credit (UC) residents will require additional support from the Council and Job Centre Plus. To ensure this is effective joining up these two services for the transition period will give residents the additional support they require at this important time for them.

The proposal is that a member of staff from Job Centre Plus will be on site in one of the rooms in the reception area and the Council's Customer Service Centre (CSC) staff can arrange appointments for residents to get advice about job searches, claiming universal credit and avoiding sanctions.

It is anticipated that eventually this will be for up to 2 or 3 days a week from 10am until 4pm by appointment. The initiative is aimed to commence in February 2015 for the first UC claims and will be initially 1 day a week to start with as the number of claims will be relatively small. Should the service prove effective the number of days will be increased in line with the increase to UC claims.

2. Set up a project team to manage direct payments for social housing tenants

With the roll out of UC social tenants will have their housing costs paid directly to them for the first time. UC is also paid monthly and in arrears which will be a major financial transition for many tenants.

To avoid an increase in arrears and evictions the transition process must be closely managed and early intervention will be essential. The intention is that a project team is established which will include South Essex Homes, representatives from the social landlord group and staff from the Southend's Benefit and Housing Teams.

The project team will identify those affected in advance and ensure tenancy officers are assigned to assist them. We will work with budgeting advice services and arrange training and consultation meetings for residents individually or in groups where appropriate.

Vulnerable tenants will be helped to arrange for their rent to be paid direct to the Landlord where they meet the DWP criteria.

3. Explore options for budgeting support and debt management for residents

The intention here is that the Benefits Service will identify the existing services available in Southend and meet with Essex Savers to determine what assistance they can provide. The Service will support the social landlords in developing budgeting services jointly to reduce the cost/resource required to deliver this service.

Representatives from the Citizens Advice Bureau will work with the Council using their services and expertise to develop a solution.