



Scrutiny Topic:	Great Places supporting customers transition to UC
Start / End Date:	May - August 2019
Board:	Thursday 19 th September 2019
Judgement:	

1. Introduction

Insight is a committed group of volunteer customers keen to help improve services delivered by Great Places Housing Group. Our group of members contribute to service scrutiny reviews taking account of feedback from the wider Great Places customer base. It's our role to scrutinise service areas in detail, acting as a critical friend reporting findings and suggested recommendations to the Great Places Board, representing the customer voice.

A constant focus is membership to ensure contribution fairly reflects Great Places customer profile. We've welcomed an extra member since our last review taking the total membership to 10. We're continuing to pilot alternative methods for customers to contribute without having to attend meetings to offer customers greater opportunity to participate. We are working with the communications team to set up a closed digital group to allow members to communicate outside of meetings to progress / discuss work whilst developing relationships and enabling peer support within a group. Our new member heard about customer scrutiny when attending the annual Community Stars Awards in June. The referral was made to Great Places by David Robinson, member of Board. Mike Patra has already attended a number of meetings.

2. Review Service Area

For this review, we agreed collectively as a group to look at customers' experiences when transitioning onto Universal Credit. The purpose of our investigations was to identify areas Great Places could provide support to ease this period of change whether that is providing information, advice or signposting to specialist agencies for help. We have been mindful of Great Places' new ways of working; 'doing with, not for' to ensure our recommendations take account of this principle when developing recommendations.

Universal Credit is a means tested benefit for people of working age. It replaces means tested social security benefits and tax credits for working age individuals and families. The aim of Universal Credit is to simplify a complex benefit system, to remove disincentives to work and make work pay. The intent is to support claimants to take responsibility for managing their own budgets. Entitlement to Universal Credit depends on the claimant's / their family's income and circumstances. It is open to people in a wide range of situations, for example in work on low incomes, those looking for work, and individuals unable to work (through sickness, disability or childcare commitments and those who have caring responsibilities).

Since the introduction of Universal Credit there has been much unrest related to impact on claimants lives. We were keen to review customers' experience when transitioning onto this service and consequential impact.

We agreed to focus our review in the following areas:

- Customer access to information relating to Universal Credit
- Processes associated with claiming this benefit

- Customers' experience when transitioning onto UC

3. Aim and Scope of our review

The aim of our review is to identify ways Great Places could support customers to help enable them to manage their finances more effectively. We set a clear scope to gather data to deliver the following objectives;

- to gain a basic understanding of Universal Credit and how it works,
- find out about support offered by Great Places to customers,
- collect feedback to identify obstacles faced by customers transitioning to UC, and
- support that could be offered to help manage finances and sustain their tenancy

4. Our Approach

We sought information from key staff members to inform our review, which are listed below;

Overview of Universal Credit – Director of Neighbourhoods & Welfare Benefits Advisor – we invited the Director of Neighbourhoods & Welfare Benefits Advisor to present an introductory overview of Universal Credit.

Presentation from Customer Contact Team Leader – Rents Specialist – to understand Great Places involvement in the process of claiming Universal Credit and interaction with claimants.

Welfare Benefits Advisor (winners and losers)– to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of Universal Credit, the Welfare Benefits Advisor summarised a number of practical examples of 'winners and losers' in regards to this benefit

Update from Area & Neighbourhood Services Managers – to understand how Universal Credit has impacted customers' lives and their daily interactions with Great Places we asked for colleagues from the neighbourhood teams to update us. It was felt it would be useful to find out the effect the introduction of Universal Credit has had on rental income for the organisation.

Support provided by Tenancy Coaches – we were keen to learn about support offered to vulnerable customers by Great Places and guidance offered to colleagues

Overview of Community Investment – we heard about some interesting work carried out by the Community Investment team during our discussion with the Tenancy Coaches, which we felt would be useful to hear more detail about. We invited Great Places Head of Community Investment to provide a brief of the framework for delivery of services by their team.

Desktop Review - we completed a desktop review of evidence gathered during the review from Great Places and feedback collected from customers. The feedback substantially informed our recommendations providing a customer view of their experiences of trying to manage financially as a result of the change of benefit.

We sent a survey to customers, who had had a new claim for Universal Credit verified by Great Places in the 6 months to find out how they were managing the change.

5. Review of good practice and findings

We've outlined areas of good practice and summarised findings collected during our review in this section, which were used to agree our recommendations for service improvement.

Overview of Universal Credit – Director of Neighbourhoods & Welfare Benefits Advisor

We were provided with a brief summary of Great Places' new service delivery framework, reinforcing the 'do with not for' principle setting the scene from a customer service directorate perspective before hearing about the basics of Universal Credit to gain a level of knowledge on which to determine a scope for the review.

Areas of good practice

The new Service Delivery Framework has been designed to significantly increase neighbourhood teams' ability to work out in communities, engaging directly with customers and nurturing trusting relationships. The model aim is to maximise resources to be used more effectively in the areas of most need whilst offering consistently clear communication with customers adding clarity to offer a better service. New ways of working 'doing with, not for' forms the basis of the new service model, encouraging a shift in mind set for some customers to take greater responsibility, which is the case for UC claims.

Neighbourhood teams are supported centrally by a range of specialist teams; business insight, welfare benefits advise, legal complex case expertise and service development, who are on hand to provide guidance and advice; maximising timely resolution of enquires for customers.

Great Places have been involved in several initiatives since 2012 in respect of UC and collected much research information. The organisation is a member on a Welfare Reform group, who meet regularly with DWP and other peer social landlords.

There has been investment to increase the skill set of colleagues in The Hub to enable Customer Contact Officers to resolve more issues at the first point of contact improving customer engagement.

Great Places has an appointed Welfare Benefits Advisor, who provides advice and training to front line colleagues, keeps abreast of updates / changes in legislation and shares with colleagues the potential impact for customers.

'Help to Claim' is a service provided by Citizen's Advice Bureau in all DWP Job Centres to assist UC claimants.

DWP are trialling 'managed migration' in Harrogate; (renamed Move to UC). The trial plans to test a 'knows the claimant' approach; defined as an organisation that has had recent contact with the claimant in person or by telephone. *The theory is if an organisation 'knows a claimant', they are best placed to assess readiness to move and help claimants through the move; besides landlords this could involve Jobcentres, HMRC and LAs.* It's not clear whether the 'Help to Claim' service currently offered by the Citizen's Advice Bureau will still to be offered as part of the pilot – Move to UC.

Neighbourhood teams support each other sharing learning of experiences and UC changes at team meetings, huddles and digitally on HOME so colleagues across Great Places can access data or contact individuals for advice.

Summary of findings

Universal Credit is a new benefit for working age people that replaces a number of existing (legacy) benefits and tax credits. It's designed to support people who have a low (or no) income to manage basic living expenses and housing costs. The relationship exists between the claimant (Great Places customer) and the DWP and the landlord has become removed.

Most people across the UK are asked to claim UC if they start a new claim for benefits or they are already claiming benefits and have a change of circumstances; this is known as 'natural migration'. If people move by 'natural migration' to UC, it's not just the amount of money people are entitled to that may change, some overall rules can be different; and there is usually no going back to their previous benefit once a claim for UC has been submitted.

When a new claim is started the first payment will be made after five weeks (this includes a one month assessment period and up to 7 days for the payment to reach the claimant). The main difference of Universal Credit is it's paid once a month, which is to replicate payment from work.

Existing benefit claimants (those claiming a legacy benefit) will be moved over to Universal Credit in a process called 'managed migration' now known as 'Move to UC'. A 12-month pilot in Harrogate

commenced in July 2019. The majority of 'managed migration' will take place from 2020 and expected to complete by December 2023.

In 'managed migration' the claimant is selected by the DWP or they can nominate to be moved over to UC. The pilot will look at the process of how 10,000 claimants move onto UC and results reported to Parliament so official Regulations can be laid out for other claimants.

The important difference for people who are 'manage migrated' to UC is that they may be entitled to 'transitional protection' if they are worse off financially than on their existing benefit. Transitional protection is a top-up payment so people do not lose out because of the introduction of UC. Claimants who moved onto UC by 'natural migration' are not entitled to transitional protection.

We heard from claimants and colleagues how advice and information provided from DWP about UC can often be inconsistent and contradictory. We also learnt people had been wrongly advised to start a new claim for UC, when they were still entitled to claim a legacy benefit; subsequently losing their right to 'transitional protection' meaning a possible financial loss to the claimant.

The conditions for claiming UC are set out in a 'claimant commitment' that has to be signed at the beginning of the claim. Failure to evidence the commitment will be met with a sanction for the claimant. Outlined in the commitment is specific criteria that can involve the use of a computer, which DWP has a responsibility to support claimants who may struggle to use digital.

Presentation from Customer Contact Team Leader – Rents Specialist

The Rent Specialist Leader from The Hub set out the responsibility of a landlord to verify a claimant's identification and weekly rent payment, which is provided to DWP via a landlord portal allowing the housing cost element of a new claim to be processed.

Areas of good practice

It has been agreed that there is a greater role for The Hub to play making contact with the claimant following the verification process to provide advice and support.

Great Places has Trusted Partner Status, which enables landlords to apply for Alternative Payment Arrangements, (APAs) for their tenants without having to provide supporting evidence for each individual case. The purpose of APAs is to assist claimants to manage their UC payments, who maybe finding monthly payments a struggle; this is explained in more detail below.

To ensure a consistent approach inline with Great Places service delivery framework all requests for APAs are managed through Rent Specialists in The HUB. Although a number of Customer Contact Officers can undertake this task

To assist customers with budgeting Great Places will offer to set up a direct debit to make a payment of rent and / or a payment arrangement if there are arrears on the account. A review took place of Great Places' UC offer that takes a holistic view to help customers manage their own finances.

Summary of findings

When a new claim for UC is made this starts a calendar Monthly Assessment Period, (MAP) which is taken as the date from which payment will be made. A claimants' award of UC is reassessed every month at the end of this period of time, taking account of any wages received during the previous month and the claimant's circumstances as well as any relevant changes within this MAP.

The UC verification process forms part of a claim for UC. When a claim has been submitted claimants receive an appointment to attend the job centre and a notification is sent to the landlord to request verification of the claimant's identification and their weekly rental payment. This data has to be returned within a month or the claim will be closed.

The Hub verifies the data and sends notification to the Neighbourhood Services Manager, who contacts the customer - the data is verified on-line via the landlord portal.

Customers have access to an online claimant journal, which is used to communicate and supply information to the DWP - landlords don't have access to customers' journals.

Claimants who find receiving monthly payments of UC a struggle or have had trouble budgeting can request an Alternative Payment Arrangement, (APA) to receive UC more frequently or the payment can be split between individuals with a joint claim.

Landlords can make an application for an APA in certain circumstances so the housing element can be paid directly to them; there are different criteria for application such as rent arrears, threat of eviction and vulnerability.

The rate of deductions in regards to APAs is set by the DWP and is dependent on other deductions in place. The minimum deduction can be 10% of a claimants' UC personal allowance up to a maximum of 20% and can be as much as £63 pcm. If a customer is struggling, NSMs can agree with the customer to set up a direct debit to make a more affordable payment towards clearing the arrears.

There has been improvement since the introduction of Trusted Landlord Status, including changes to the landlord portal; the removal of old claims has meant greater accuracy of the number of live claims. The information held on the DWP's portal is very limited; i.e.) name, address, rental value but it doesn't include the claims status. There are plans to expand this detail, but in the meantime colleagues are reliant on direct contact with claimants to fully understand the status of their claim, which can be problematic.

For example; it's important for landlords to receive early notification that UC housing costs are due (when and how much) in order to alleviate any delays to UC rental payments. Such delays can significantly affect landlords' income streams and ultimately lead to commencement of possession proceedings.

Welfare Benefits Advisor (winners and losers) – we asked to work through a number of practical examples with the Welfare Benefits Advisor to gain greater understanding of circumstances, which influence claimants eligibility to UC.

Summary of findings

We learnt as a result of this exercise there are both 'winners and losers' in regards to UC claims. Claimants typically who lose out when moved onto UC are people / children with a disability, carers to people with a disability and working single parents or two earner couple households.

Claimants who will be moved onto UC as a part of managed migration are entitled to 'transition protection' if they are worse off claiming UC. Whereas anyone who started a claim as a result of a change in circumstances, 'natural migration' wouldn't have been eligible for this payment so are at a loss financially.

Currently legislation restricts the calculation of UC to the weekly rent multiplied by a maximum of 52 weeks although UC is paid monthly. Where a claimant has a weekly rental liability, they'll therefore have to make either 4 or 5 week rent payments in any one month. DWP recognise there's an issue with the way UC regulations convert weekly liability into a monthly allowance. It was recently said they're considering if this formulation around weekly rent in UC calculation should be amended.

Area / Neighbourhood Services Managers, Q&A - to find out the effect of UC and customers interactions with Great Places, we asked neighbourhood teams to provide an update.

Areas of good practice

Actions planned for 2019 / 2020 include a review of;

- i) the Income Management Strategy, the dashboard,
- ii) the open housing UC module and
- iii) the formation of the rent service excellence group.

As an outcome of the Business Transformation review in Neighbourhood Services the internal support offer has been stripped back considerably and replaced with the principle of 'working with and not for' our customers, which allows Great Places to work smarter with our resources.

The reduction of patch sizes have allowed neighbourhood service teams to work more closely with customers, to gain greater understanding of day-to-day issues so relevant support can be provided, which help customers manage better. Improved relationships aids the identification of customers in need of support with UC, which can be more time intensive than housing benefit if there are difficulties with the claim and the rent account needs closer monitoring.

Great Places' Tenancy Coaches work to support customers with more complex issues than UC alone. However, the team are 'on-hand' to guide neighbourhood teams in ways to support customers using coaching skills, taking account of long term support that can be accessed by the customer.

All neighbourhood teams have had specific UC training delivered by the Welfare Benefits Advisor and on-going support can be sought, as and when teams need guidance with regards to UC.

Summary of findings

We were informed by the team there has been a lack of understanding and knowledge of UC amongst customers and it appears there can be an absence of appropriate support from the DWP.

Customers weren't always clear of the need to make a separate claim for council tax in addition to their UC claim. Neighbourhood teams were finding customers hadn't fully appreciated the impact of their claimant commitment and subsequent sanctions related to a failure of compliance.

Current arrears levels across Great Places has increased from 2.8% to 3.7% as at the end of the financial year 2018 / 19 and average arrears is £800 on a rent account of a UC claimant. Surprisingly, the number of evictions, as a result of rent arrears has decreased from 37 to 18; 'old ways of working' teams would have pushed on with the arrears process and an application automatically made for an APA. The new Service Delivery Framework sets the tone of putting responsibility back to the customer by having honest dialogue which encourages and supports individuals to manage their finances and access support from more suitable agencies such as CAB and local job centres.

More time is now dedicated to monitoring rent accounts of customers with live UC claims. For example; some customers experiencing difficulties understanding their claim, payments can be reduced or missing for a range of reasons including hours worked, third party deductions or due to DWP overpayment which are often taken directly.

Great Places access to claim related information is limited, especially if the customer chooses not to engage. The DWP restrict engagement with landlords since the relationship is seen to lie between the claimant and the DWP.

Support provided by Tenancy Coaches

We were keen to hear how the Tenancy Coach role is integrated into service delivery, offering support to help Great Places customers sustain their tenancy.

Summary of findings / best practice

Great Places has 6 tenancy coaches working across the Northwest and Yorkshire providing tenancy sustainment to general needs customers who are potentially at risk of losing their tenancy. Tenancy coaches work in areas of demand; there aren't any set patches, which helps keep the service consistent and fluid.

Coaches attempt to build on the resilience of support the customer has already received; working on the theory that firm, trusting relationships may already be in place, which can be utilised to support customers. NSMs contact coaches to make a referral or to seek guidance, once background data has been gathered, an assessment can be made and support identified. A tenancy coach will establish what the customer already can do to ensure support is relevant and helps the customer to support themselves. The coach will take a step back, working with the customer to work out a solution calling upon resources and past experiences.

We heard that a tenancy coach had worked with a customer in ill health, who received 6 weeks of intensive support prior to acknowledgement and acceptance of the situation and what had to be done. The tenancy coach walked step by step with the customer who is now in receipt of an income, receiving appropriate treatment for health issues.

Most importantly the tenant is now in a position to manage day to day life as a result of the resilience gained with the assistance of support. We were told that it can often seem like a contradiction to customers who have breached the terms of their tenancy that their landlord wishes to provide support to sustain their tenancy.

Overview of Social Investment

We were informed of some of the work carried out by the Community Investment Team to support neighbourhoods in which Great Places own stock. We invited the Head of Community Investment to update us on the team's new framework for delivery. The focus of the teams' offer comprises of work around reducing poverty, as well as creating sustainable communities, employment and skills.

Summary of findings and best practice

The Community Investment team work with customers, colleagues and partners. Their aim is to help customers to maximise household budgets (financial inclusion) and secure affordable credit, food supplies and affordable warmth.

The team is flexible with their offer working collaboratively with colleagues in Neighbourhoods and Independence & Wellbeing to identify customers and households that require assistance in accessing services to maximise income, as well as employment, volunteering or training.

The team takes a strength-based community development approach building on what is positive about people and the places they live. An integral part of the work is to help customers and communities recognise their capabilities and assist to build on their strengths. The team will look at the demographics and challenges within areas. Simultaneously neighbourhood teams work to get to know customers better enabling the identification of those who may be struggling or who may not ordinarily engage although they would clearly benefit from support.

Great Places has Community Partnership Managers who work out in anchor neighbourhoods with agencies and other partners; each have a budget of £16k to support community initiatives to identify opportunities of employment and training, reduce poverty and create sustainable neighbourhoods.

Desktop Review - Gathering feedback from customers

With each review we have found that customer feedback has been an invaluable element; enabling areas for improvement to be identified and relevant recommendations to be determined.

We sent surveys to 700 customers who have made an application for UC, which has subsequently had details verified by Great Places. The survey was emailed to customers or as a web link to a mobile number, if an up to date email address wasn't held in AXIS. The survey asked a number of questions relating to the customers background before questioning the claimants' status in regards to UC for example;

- waiting on my 1st payment,
- claimed UC for less than 6 months and
- claimed UC for more than 6 months

We received 149 survey responses representing a 20% response rate; a majority of 72% were customers who had claimed UC for less than 6 months, 18% had had an active claim for more than 6 months and the remaining responses were waiting on their claim to be assessed.

What the data told us;

- 69% of customers responded confirming they'd transferred to UC as a result to a change of circumstances, *natural migration*
- a majority of 48% respondents described their household make-up as 'single with children', 26% single with no children or dependents and 24% of the responses were couples with children

We've summarised below headline feedback themes, which influenced our recommendations for service improvement.

- Of 132 responses 85% said their understanding of UC was confused or very basic at the time of making an application,
- Of 134 responses 58% found information provided by DWP was unclear or too basic, 25% said, it had been fairly useful, only 14% reported it being of use to them at that time,
- a majority of customers said they would go to the job centre or look on-line if they needed more information or help with UC, the next common options were to seek guidance from the citizen's advice bureau or friends and family
- Of 133 responses 34% described their experience of making an application for UC as difficult or fairly difficult

Customers were asked what would have made the process easier for them, their responses included;

- i) having had more information, ii) had an option to speak to a person especially if there are complex circumstances, iii) easier navigation of the website, iv) clearer information, v) helpful staff at DWP, and vi) less complicated process, less confusing
- Of 132 responses 77% said they had felt unprepared for the transition to UC, answers ranged from 51% who were 'completely' unprepared through to 21% who felt 'fairly' unprepared

Customers were asked what would have helped them prepare better for the transition to UC; their responses included;

- i) more information before job centre appointment, ii) greater understanding of what was involved in the transition, iii) warning of the long wait before receipt of 1st payment so I could have informed all my bills, iv) explanation of how UC would impact other benefits, v) not having money for a number of weeks, which has left me in debt and vi) being able to speak to a person

When asked how customers managed financially whilst waiting for their 1st payment a majority confirmed they applied for a UC advanced payment, borrowed from friends and family or even that they hadn't coped and had struggled.

- Of 128 responses 59% weren't confident they'd manage budgeting their finances monthly

Customers were asked what would have helped them manage the change to monthly budgeting better, their responses included;

- i) weekly payments, ii) payment made direct to landlord, iii) budgeting advice, and iv) not having to wait as long for 1st payment
- Of 118 responses 49% said they were managing a monthly budget since receiving UC

Customers were asked what would have helped them manage better, their responses included;

- i) knowing how much my payments will be, ii) more frequent payments than monthly, iii) paying less back for UC Advanced Payment, a more structured budget plan and iv) more money
- of 133 responses only 8 customers when asked understood what an Alternative Payment Arrangement is and only 3 customers had an active APA in place

When we asked customers who said they had been received a sanction for not evidencing their claim commitment, only 3 out of 6 responses confirmed challenging DWP's decision. Responses cited not challenging the sanction because they didn't know how to do so, finding it difficult to get through to DWP and felt they hadn't been listened to by DWP.

Encouragingly of 124 responses 77% said they planned or had stayed in-touch with Great Places whilst awaiting their 1st payment of UC. 74% of customers confirmed setting up a payment plan to pay rent and / or clear any arrears. Although, 63% of 122 customers answered 'no' when asked if they knew what Great Places would do during the time you're unable to pay rent.

We asked customers whether they felt they knew more about UC at the time of completing this survey compared to when they had first made an application;

- responses showed 75% of 114 responses did feel they knew more about UC, although 25% answered 'no'

6. Review Summary

In this next section, we'd like to summarise themes noted throughout the review.

An overarching theme the customer feedback highlighted was the importance of claimants having easy access to clear information, which is relevant to their circumstances, which is easy to understand as well as having the opportunity to clarify their understanding with a person.

The feedback comments demonstrated some customers felt completely at a loss and unsupported throughout the transition to UC, which has caused unrest, worry and has had a detrimental impact on the lives of people.

A majority of customers told us they felt 'unprepared' for UC, therefore it seems vital to share information and start conversations with customers prior to transitioning onto UC, during and after the transition once payment is in place as a 'health check' to assess how customers are managing financially. This offer to customers would hopefully be taken as a genuine effort of help and build stronger relationships.

Targeting customers early on in the transition process would be an opportunity to start conversations clarifying information, building confidence to dispel any fears any myths. It would be an ideal time to establish supportive two-way relationships with customers and the need for open honest communication.

We feel the approach taken by Great Places with The Hub contacting the customers to give support once a claim has been verified is timely. The 'new' UC open housing module has been well considered using both text messages and direct contact from the NSMs offering choice of support to customers, which is relevant to their needs. Customers didn't appear to consider Great Places as a source for getting information or help with UC, therefore it is felt these actions will only act to reinforce Great Places offer to customers, building better relationships.

Customer feedback showed there is an under use of Credit Unions as a source of funds, people choosing to take out an Advanced UC Payment, or borrow from family and friends. Data also illustrated there was a lack of knowledge amongst customers of Alternative Payment Arrangements, which could serve to help the transition from weekly payments of an assortment of benefits to one UC payment.

We're happy with the action plan and Great Places' response to our recommendations.

7. Recommendations

Based on the review findings, we'd like to propose the following recommendations to contribute and help support delivery of quality customer service, which meets customers' needs and priorities.

1. In our survey customers didn't identify Great Places as an information source in regards to Universal Credit. Raise Great Places profile as being a source of information, support and advice in relation to UC for customers
2. Develop a mechanism to provide weekly prompts to customers when a Universal Credit claim has been submitted which acts as both triggers and a checklist
3. Devise a communications plan of how Great Places will engage with customers regarding Universal Credit and inform of updates and changes

4. Include a post on the header of Great Places website about Universal Credit with a link to the Money Advice page
5. Frontline teams to proactively work with customers to raise awareness in preparation of a transition to Universal Credit and what this can mean from a practical point of view
6. Promote Credit Unions with customers, the benefits of becoming a member; using practical scenarios as examples
7. Inform customers of the options available by applying for Alternative Payment Arrangements, APAs
8. Run campaigns for vulnerable customers who may already have existing arrears on their account – working in conjunction with tenancy coaches taking a wider view of customers circumstances

8. Overall Judgement

We recognised when considering our overall judgement that this review takes account of Great Places future offer to customers as well as the current service being delivered. Therefore we agreed to give a score for each of these areas using a rating scale of ‘poor, fair, good or excellent’.

Overall Judgement	
Current offer of service delivery	Fair to Good
Future offer of service delivery	Good to Excellent

Our score for future delivery reflects the exceptionally positive response provided to us in regards to our recommendations. Based on this we are extremely confident that recommendations will be fully implemented.

We would like to recognise the contribution and thank colleagues who have contributed to this review.