

## Note of the Fife Employability Forum

Wednesday 25 November 2015, Rothes Halls, Glenrothes

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The Forum were pleased to welcome Lindsay Geddes, Janet McQueen and Karen Gallagher from DWP; Sheila Haig, Edinburgh Council; Joanne Nethercott, WEACT; and Ian McConnachie, Community Renewal who gave really informative presentations on the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and the experiences from Edinburgh. Robert McGregor also gave an overview on what is happening with regard to welfare reform more generally in Fife.

Copies of all slides are embedded below as well as a 'frequently asked questions' guide on Universal Credit from the DWP.

The talks generated a lot of questions (cut short by a fire alarm!). Some key messages are:

- The majority of benefit claimants are still exempt from Universal Credit – the details of exemptions are in the FAQ document below.
- In Edinburgh UC has affected just under 2000 people in the first 6 months of roll out.
- There is a 6 week turnaround between claim submission and first payment and this is a critical time for many claimants.
- Take up of personal budgeting support has been lower than expected in Edinburgh and has often come up later on in claiming.
- Rent arrears prior to even moving onto UC has caused significant issues in Edinburgh. Communication with the housing department is critical.

Slides from the Forum can be accessed [here](#).

### Round table discussions:

Following the presentations the Forum discussed the implications of this for providers, individuals and JC+ in Fife.

1. As providers what can we do to prepare?
2. What will individuals affected by UC need from us?
3. What do our Job Centre Plus colleagues need from us?

### Key recommendations from the group discussions are as follows:

- *A clear marketing and comms strategy* designed to reassure, so that those impacted by UC know who they are (and aren't). This should be timetabled to fit with 'spike' periods such as

the end of the academic year. This could include awareness sessions on UC that can be delivered direct to clients.

- *In-depth training should be provided to all frontline employability, welfare and housing staff covering the UC claim process, digital support in Fife, crisis grants and the local supports available. Most importantly the importance of reassuring clients and working with JC+ to help people navigate the process.*
- *Existing digital skills training and accessible IT needs to be marketed and promoted. Some of the current training may need to be adapted to help people fulfil the basic UC requirements.*
- *A 'mock UC form' and checklist for documents required would be very helpful for frontline staff to take people through a 'practice run'.*
- *Fife Council needs a Universal Credit Champion overseeing the process and coordinating with housing and others.*
- *Each Job Centre should have a UC champion who would act as a go to for enquiries and problems.*
- *The idea of 'support hubs' were popular although the figures from Edinburgh showed low take up. One suggestion is to place hubs within the Job Centres with a select range of support services on hand at regular times each week.*
- *Relationships with Job Centre Plus are critical. JC+ staff need our help to understand when people are genuinely struggling. Providers need to build relationships with their local Job Centre to improve trust and communications. This could be done through for example job shadowing, tours of the job centres, participating at Wednesday information sessions. And feedback; Job Centre Managers need to know if things aren't working.*
- *Relationships with Housing are critical. Fife Council housing department will be a key partner in managing arrears in advance of UC roll out*
- *Crisis grants and personal budgeting support – will be essential, including help to open bank accounts.*

A full list of all notes from the discussion groups can be found at Annex 1.

### Feedback

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As a result of this Forum 100% of attendees who provided feedback found the DWP and Edinburgh perspective presentations productive or very productive, and as result 60% feel better able to influence public policy. 92% will attend future employability forums or aim to send another.

## THANK YOU!

We would once again like to thank everyone who took part on the day and our speakers – without whom we would have had nothing to discuss!!

**Annex 1: Group Discussions notes**

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Following the presentations participants were asked to consider the following questions (the points in bold were identified as the most important):

**As providers what can we do to prepare for Universal Credit?**

- **Have a standard UC Presentation – delivered direct to (e.g. job club) customers likely to be affected**
- **Have a ‘mock’ form – know they (we) can make a mistake and it doesn’t count. Or there is an option to print the form & try it out pre-submission**
- **Have checklist of info required and exemptions circulated to all frontline employability staff – TRAINING on this is essential to provide reassurance and smooth process**
- **Hub idea would be good – with range of services in them – foodbanks, third sector, training providers. If not in a separate place then even within the Job Centres.**
- **Education/training for staff on the ground – training from DWP – training - Educated requirements/legislation/info accurate.**
- Flyer for emergency contacts – foodbank, fuel poverty
- Community jobs clubs
- More information DWP – who on UC – dates payments
- Working with employed/unemployed
- Planned, positive communication, targeting. Re-assurance for clients
- Understand the student year-prepare for spike Christmas time (ER)
- Engaging with vulnerable groups
- Partnership working-coordinate our support - Work in partnership and share information - Improve communication between agencies as offer similar courses & client groups and possible sharing of courses/support to clients
- Help people to open bank accounts
- DWP can get ID for proof of NI for young people
- Can library buildings/resources be integrated with other services and built upon.

**What will individuals affected by UC need from us?**

- **Information/factual/timely - Knowledge from staff - Trust information from staff - Clear concise information and advice - Clarity – good information - reassurance (twice)**  
**Understanding/empathy regarding my personal situation**
- **Basic awareness sessions for future UC claimants** - Preparation for the change
- **Information to be made available regarding welfare fund, crisis grants etc. Good signposting – simple flow chart e.g. if? Where/who/what help I can get**
- **Digital support- access to PC’s/support locally - Access to IT and IT support - IT support**

- **Personal Budgeting Support- coordinate a response** - pressure of monthly budget
- Support to negotiate with JC+ on claimant commitment of 35 hrs/week job search for people who are being phased into work for health reasons
- Face to face support - One person – or limited persons as point of reference – continuity
- Contact from housing service as soon as claim made!! Welcome pack approach! Resource intensive and ongoing
- Private rented sector communication
- Housing – Rent and charges
- Trying to work with people in arrears to clear prior to starting UC.
- Struggle with long term unemployed
- Cleared definition of hours worked with job coaches

### What do our Job Centre Plus colleagues need from us?

- **A good understanding of the individual we/they deal with. Intellectual, emotional capacity – communication skills/difficulties the need for support. – to communicate accurately**
- **Good feedback so we can provide reassurance and on-going support from JCP staff to us!**
- **Work more in partnership with individual and their support person.**
- Job shadowing with housing/PBS partners CR.
- Information sharing and compatible systems
- Understanding of roles – work coaches, customer service centre
- Accurate information regarding clients support
- Better communication network – better relationships
- Realistic agreements for claimant commitment
- Training – new approach, looking at barriers, working holistically
- Understanding of processes and effects on individual
- Advisors be aware of client disability and impact on life
- Work coaches have number to contact DWP for information or to give update of client.