



Flintshire County Council
Universal Credit and Welfare Reform

End of Year Report 2017-2018

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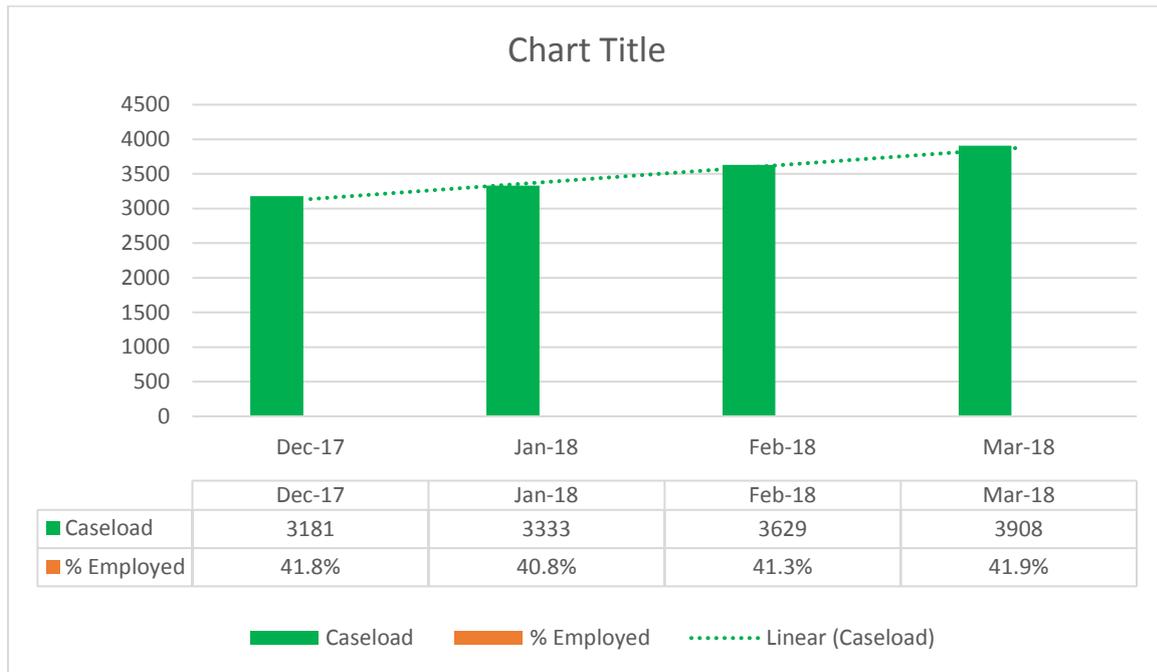
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1.0 Background

Universal Credit, which is one of the UK Governments Flagship reforms, has been operating in Flintshire since 2014. From April 2017 Universal Credit Full service was rolled out in Flintshire job centres.

2.0 Universal Credit – Wales Picture

Following the latest release of the GB UC statistical data by DWP, a snapshot confirms Flintshire’s Universal Credit caseload for December 2017 and January 2018 and the percentage of those employed:-



The chart shows a steady increase of caseload volume with still less than 50% of people who are employed.

For Wales, the overall caseload picture is 28,549 – an increase of 1,423 of which 40.2% are employed. These figures are indicative of the roll out for further job centres. More recently Wrexham and Denbighshire areas which border Flintshire postcodes.

Flintshire’s Picture

Universal Credit – Stats March 2018

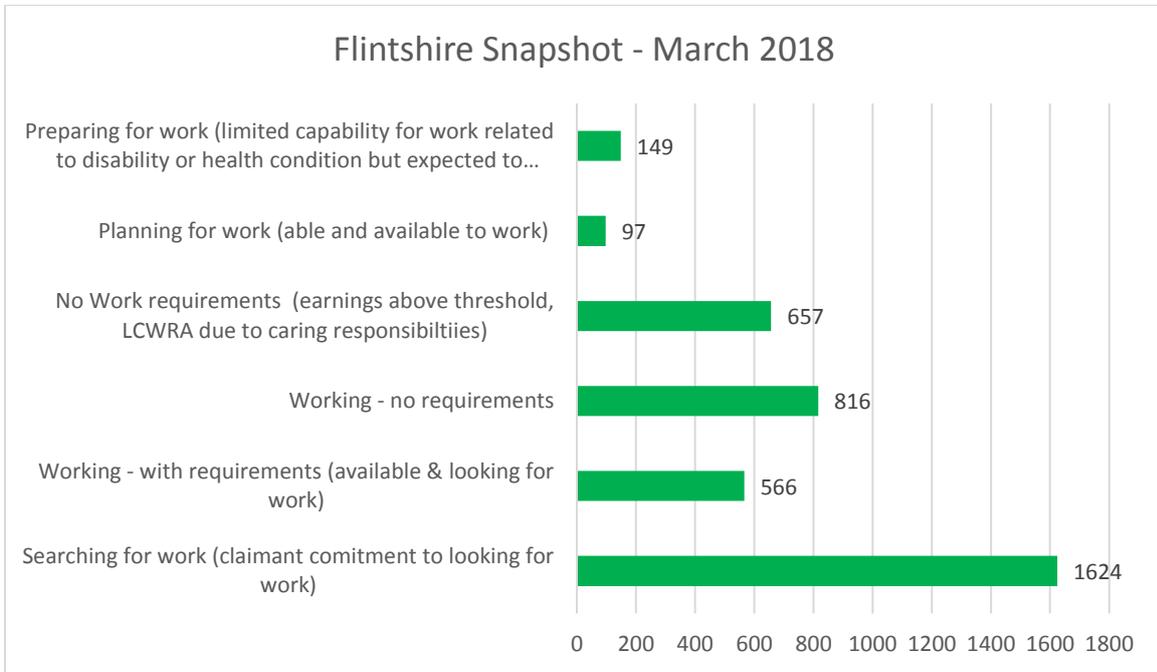
Volume of UC Caseload by Job Centre = 3974 (see breakdown below)

Please Note: There are some variances in data due to minimising risk of identification of individuals.

Job Centre	Total people on UC
Flint	1137
Mold	1098
Shotton	1739

Source of information: Universal Credit: Official Statistics Dept. for Work & Pensions.

Flintshire Snapshot - March 2018



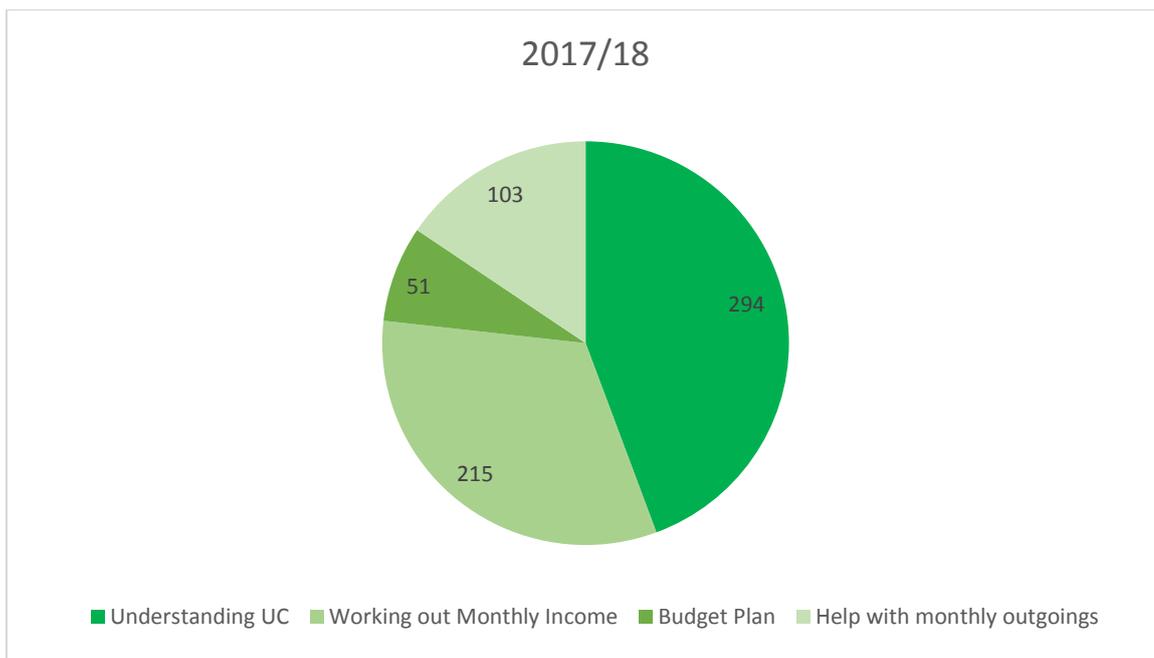
This graph is based on a total of 3,909 caseload, and indicates 83% of UC cases either are searching for work or have conditionality and contact with work coaches.

3.0 Personal Budgeting Support (PBS)

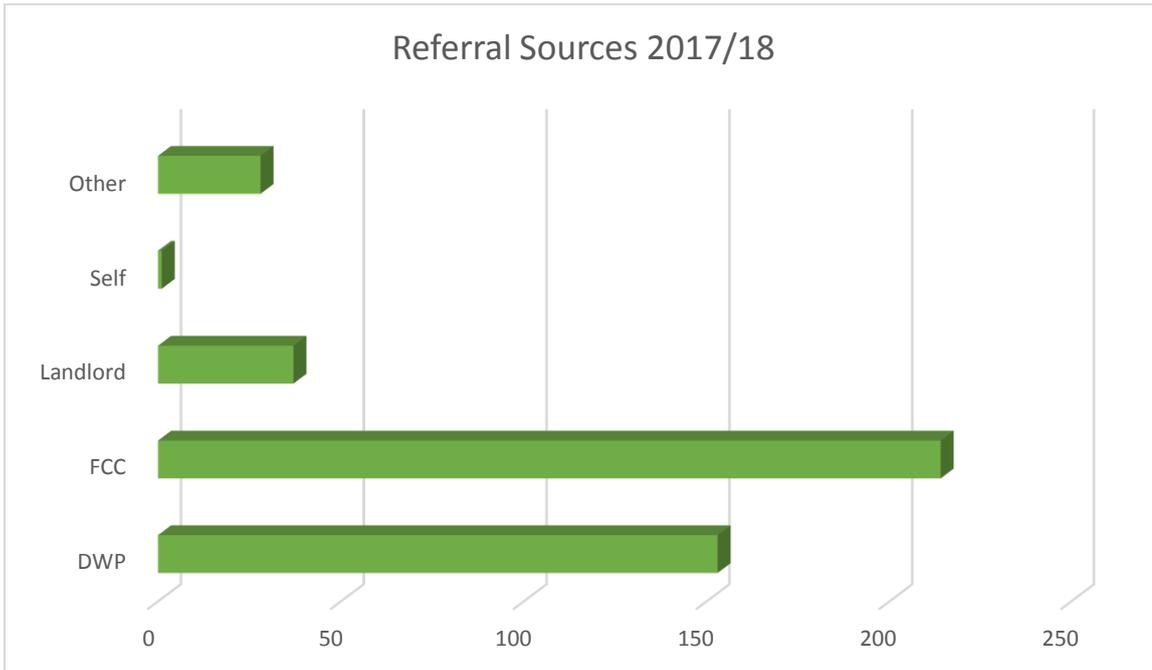
Personal Budgeting and Support is to help Universal Credit claimants to manage their own budgets in order to prepare them for moving back to work, and to help support the financial changes that UC brings.

Due to an increase in demand for the service, 6 PBS sessions are offered over five days a week, working within Jobcentres and Connects offices across Flintshire.

Some of the outcomes achieved in 2017/18 include:

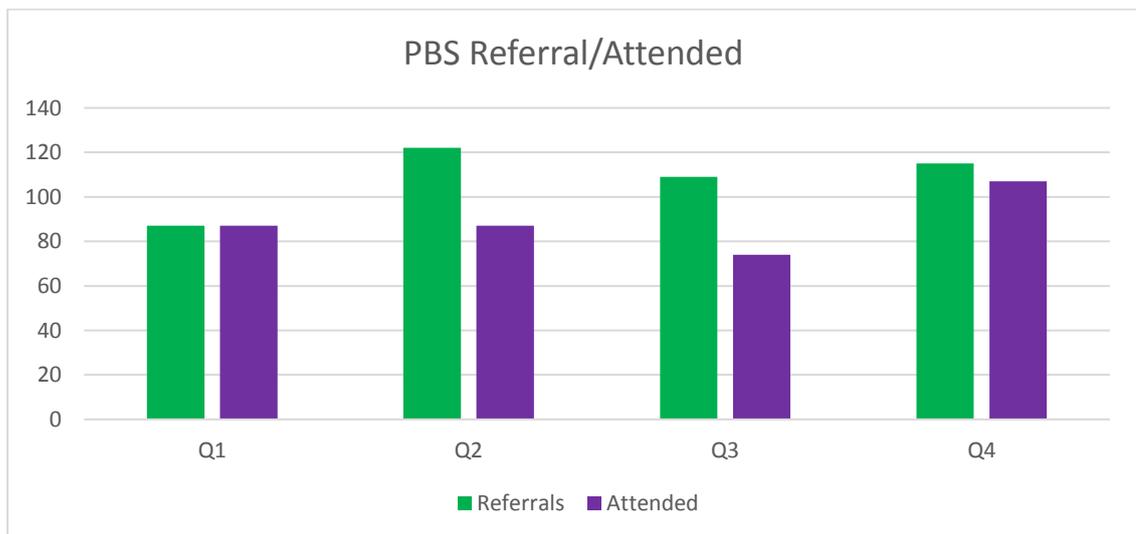


The referral sources are shown below for 2017/18, the other includes other support agencies and partners.



During PBS appointments our experience has shown that there many customers who are experiencing difficulties relating to :-

- Delays in telephone response whilst trying to contact UC,
- Incorrect calculations of housing costs etc.



As part of Personal Budgeting Support (PBS), budget plans are completed, and discussions around potential DHP can be considered for any shortfalls in rent liability as a method of supporting customers faced with financial difficulties.

In addition, recognising UC customers who receive managed payments to landlords are being referred for PBS as this is a potential indicator of someone who may require further support to manage finances.

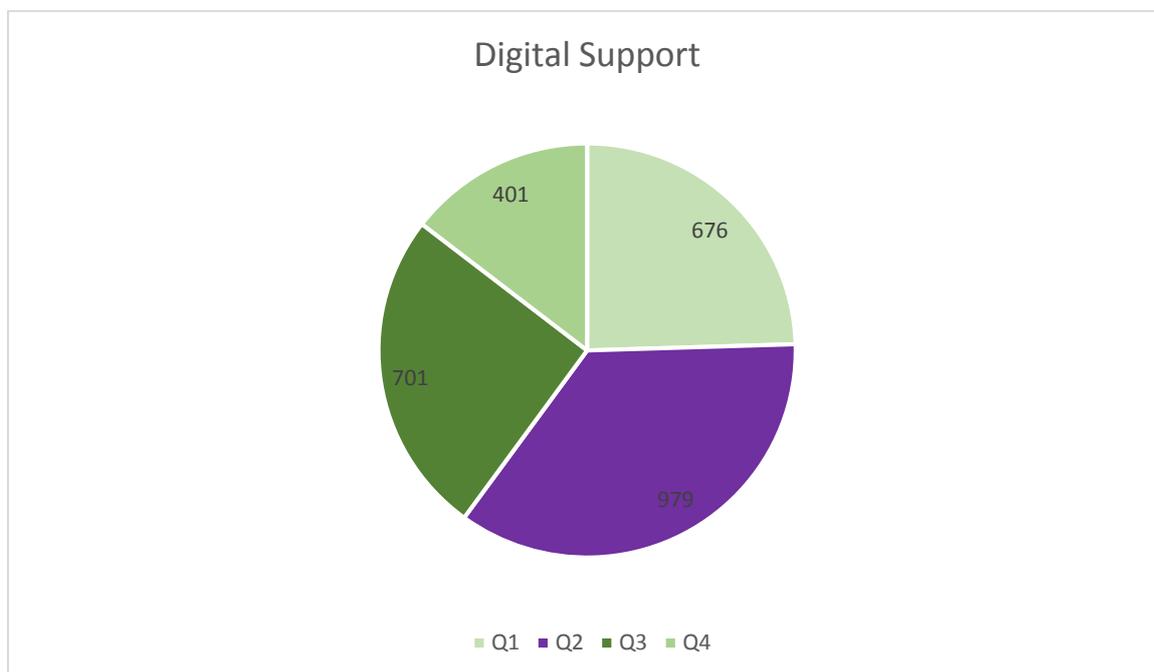
To continue improving communication links between the Job Centres and Flintshire, the customer is asked to inform the work coach via their journal of Discretionary Housing Payment awards to inform the work coach of support in place.

Customers are reminded of appointments prior to the session, and work coaches are informed of appointments made which is updated on the customer's journal which aids discussion around financial management. We have seen an increase in Q4 (refer to chart above) which seems to indicate that this approach has increased customer's attendance.

Personal Budgeting Attended - 2017/18

Universal Support	Estimated Numbers	Actual Numbers
Personal Budgeting	487	355

73% of the estimated numbers actually attended Personal Budgeting Appointments.



Funding arrangements from DWP are based on estimated numbers Personal Budgeting and digital support. For the digital support, FCC current exceeds the estimated numbers.

Universal Support	Estimated Numbers	Actual Numbers
Assisted Digital	510	2757

People accessing Assisted Digital Support exceeded estimated numbers by 462%.

For Assisted Digital Support, Local Authority receiving funding based on providing access to digital support for up 102 mins per customer.

Personal Budgeting Advice – Repeat Appointments 2017/18

The funding receiving by Flintshire Council from the Dept for Works & Pensions is paid based on one appointment for a customer, however, analysis has confirmed that a person may visit more than once however, for the purposes of MI this attendance is only recorded once.

Analysis below confirms from a total of 452 customers seen during the year, 48 of those were repeat appointments which equates to 11% of the appointments.

No. of customers attended more than one PBS appointment	Additional time spent (Appointment hrs)	% extra hours (due to additional appointments)
48	91 hrs	11%

No. of customers attended 2 appointments	No. of customers attended 3 appointments
43	5

4.0 Welfare Reform Response Team

The Welfare Response Reform Team (WRRT) provides support to Flintshire residents with options to become more financially independent.

The team has recently adapted its processes to incorporate DHP decision making for customers who also are attending Personal Budgeting Support appointments. The aim is to help address demand for DHP and proactively engage in early budgetary discussions.

Work undertaken include:-

- Support with budgeting for customers receiving Universal Credit to help manage income and expenses.
- Assisting in planned responses through Discretionary Housing Payments to those who are having problems paying their rent, and people who are at an increased risk of homelessness/eviction.
- Complete emergency type applications such as Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF).

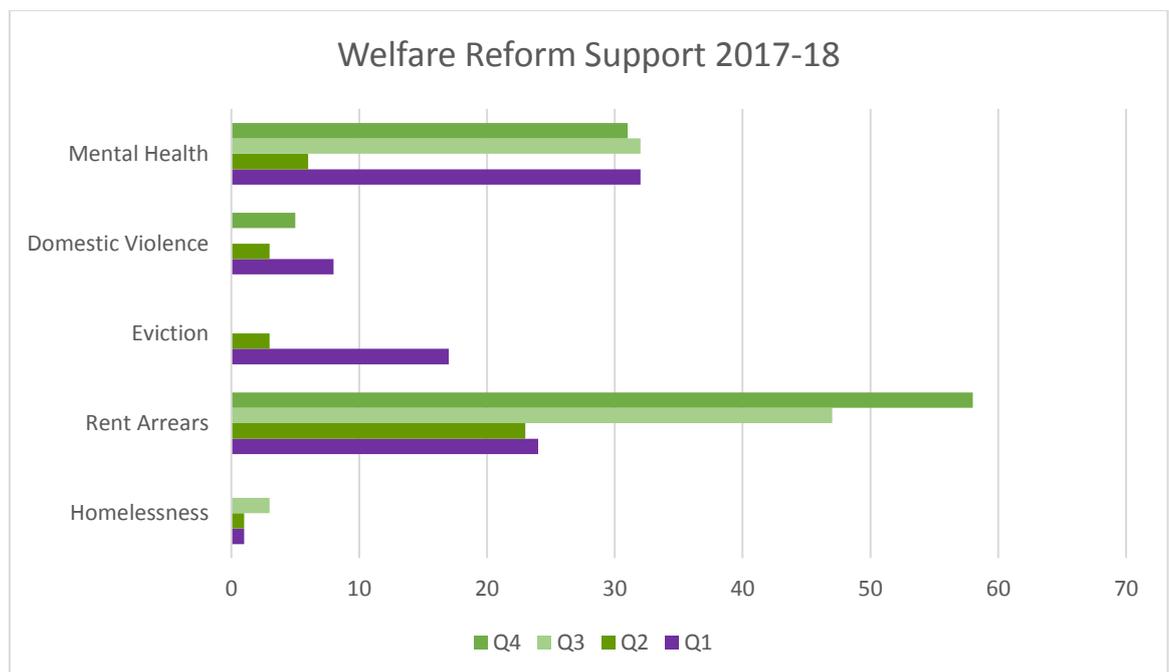
- Signpost for specialist advice and/or support; including those with employment barriers and referrals to energy advice.

The Team offer PBS appointments for those customers who have “managed payment to landlord arrangements” which require authorisation from landlords and any new Universal Credit customers are offered PBS appointments to help with the financial transition to Universal Credit. This is a recent introduction into the Welfare Reform Response Team work and analysis is currently being undertaken around its success.

As part of the Budgeting and Welfare work undertaken, the team have assisted people who are facing a variety of experiences which have included incorrect housing element. This has resulted in contacting the Universal Credit Service Centre Housing team to escalate. Our findings indicate that it can often be very lengthy to resolve due to reliance on information being provided from landlords or from the information provided Universal Credit’s understanding of eligible and non-eligible service charges.

The chart below shows that the majority of support has been provided to those with mental health and rent arrears. There has been a particular growth in Q3 with these issues

For those identified with mental health or rent arrears, support can often be in place, however, our experience shows there is a growing number of support referrals made.



The increase of customers with rent arrears could be related to an increase in volume of customers making new claims for Universal Credit and experiencing delays between their benefits. (From Housing Benefit over to Universal Credit).

The team will continue to work with other departments and closely with the DWP, to identify those cases where rent arrears are starting to increase and financial difficulties are experienced with a view to establishing appropriate options such as offering Personal Budgeting and Support for earlier intervention and longer term outcomes which the LA and customer agrees.

Some key issues for escalation have included:-

- Incorrect housing costs
- Delays in payments

Detailed below are some of the outcomes provided by the Welfare Reform, the team support people effected by a variety of reforms including MRSS (bedroom tax), benefit cap, local housing allowance reform, under 35 LHA etc.

2017/18	Preventing Homelessness	Immediate Needs	Budgeting	Priority Debts	Non priority Debts
Quarter 1	54	25	35	22	25
Quarter 2	41	37	35	45	30
Quarter 3	50	50	33	63	38
Quarter 4	72	54	58	74	57

5.0 Universal Credit Issues raised by Flintshire

Flintshire has played a key role in raising concerns relating to the Universal Credit scheme, specifically in the following areas:-

“Untidy tenancies “

Flintshire has raised concerns around those tenancies where a partner has vacated the property (separation, relationship breakdown etc). In such cases where there are rent arrears, the partner’s name remains on the tenancy. Universal Credit will only pay half of the housing costs in these cases, as the partner left in the property will be making a single claim.

A solution has been put forward to consider an approach which mirrors the Council Tax Regulations around joint and several liability. This matter is currently being considered at a national level.

As an interim measure, customers are advised to report the change via their UC journal and ask their Landlord to confirm that they are the only tenant in the property, other customers have provided council tax bills showing the single person deduction as evidence. This has some impact on rent arrears whilst confirmation is agreed, in some cases has taken a few months to resolve.

Deputyship Arrangements

During discussions and reported concerns from deputyship and support service areas within Flintshire Council, it has become clear that Universal Credit does not support those who are unable to deal with their own affairs and have a corporate appointee in place.

To make a claim online the customer requires an individual email address which often they do not have. Corporate appointees/deputyship support who provide support for a number of people have had to supply individual email addresses for each case which makes it difficult to manage and provide the support. This also provides difficulties when supporting people to make new claims for Universal Credit.

Currently, there is a local working arrangement with Mold Job Centre which has been most helpful in assisting appointee/deputyship officers without the need for further consent when supporting customers.

The DWP are currently looking into this issue and it is hoped this will be formally agreed and extended to further Job Centres within the locality and nationally.

Flintshire are currently awaiting an outcome.

Backdating

There is an issue with backdating of Universal Credit claims and this is causing financial hardship for new UC customers. Flintshire has raised this with Dept for Works & Pensions for considering an alternative approach to reduce the impact of this. The local authority are putting measures in place to help identify a customer's "date of claim" when an application for Housing Benefit is made rather than Universal Credit.

Losses for Bed & Breakfast Homeless Placements

For the period 1st April 2017 to 22/1/18 Housing Benefit losses for cases placed in Bed & Breakfast accommodation which if claimed via the Housing Benefit route at the time rather than UC is £59,246.21. However, with the re-introduction of temporary accommodation into Housing Benefit from April 2018 will remove this pressure for 2018/19.

6.0 Autumn Budget Statement

Removal of 7 day waiting period

February 2018 sees the removal of 7 day waiting period for Universal Credit claiming process so that the claim starts from the date of application. This reduces the number of weeks from 6 to 5 before a first payment is received.

Additional 2 weeks of Housing Benefit

From April 2018 those already on Housing Benefit will continue to receive their award for the first two weeks of their Universal Credit claim.

Private Landlords can ask for their tenant's Universal Credit housing costs to be paid directly to them without explicit consent from the customer, this can be triggered by the work coach or account manager.

In addition customers who are migrating/starting a new claim from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit whose previous Housing Benefit award was paid direct to the landlord, will be given the option for their Housing Costs to be paid direct to their landlord.

The results of this change will need to be monitored for impact on UC customer's financial ability.

Temporary Accommodation

From April 2018 Temporary accommodation (i.e. B&B, emergency, homeless) will be moved back into main Housing benefit for administration.

18 – 21 Year Olds

In March 2018, it was announced that all 18 -21 year olds, will be able to access support with their Housing Costs through Universal Credit. Currently, changes in legislation are due. The Council are waiting for further announcements.

Couples with three or more children

From February 2019, people with 3 or more children will be signposted to claim Universal Credit.

7.0 Additional Delivery

To help supporting other services throughout the Council and third party organisations Universal Credit awareness training has been provided to the following areas:-

- Flintshire County Council, Human Resource & Organisational Development
- Flintshire Connects
- Community Based Accommodation Support
- Drug & Alcohol Team
- Community Mental Health Team
- Social Services
- Housing Team
- Rent Income Team
- Libraries

In addition, awareness sessions have been delivered to the DWP Work Coaches for Discretionary Housing Payments and Council Tax Reduction Scheme applications.

Workshops and events have been provided to a range of support service providers including Registered Social Landlords, through relevant Landlord Forum events, Flintshire Citizens Advice, Shelter and other third party organisations.

Plans for 2018/19

To re-evaluate the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy to consider impacts for Universal Credit customers.

8.0 Universal Credit - Case Studies

Miss W Case Study

Customer has various health problems including chronic anxiety, depression and an eating disorder in which she has experienced significant weight loss, mainly due to the recent bereavement of her long term partner. Customer made a claim for Universal Credit as her joint claim with her partner stopped after he passed away.

Chronology of events and issues with UC claim:

Customer made a claim for UC, and had her housing costs verified, housing element was not included in her first UC payment.

UC were contacted and informed her that there was a delay in processing housing costs but the issue should be resolved by her next payment date. On the second payment date there were still no housing costs.

At the PBS appointment, UC was contacted and service centre advised the issue should be resolved shortly the delay was due to a discrepancy. The Service Centre could not confirm what the discrepancy was at this point but she was in rent arrears of two months. The officer advised the customer to submit a tenancy agreement and rent statement to UC, to quicken the process of the discrepancy.

Two weeks later at a second PBS session, the customer had submitted their tenancy agreement as advised, The Service centre was contacted and informed that there was no discrepancy and the Managed Payment to Landlord had been set up and the two payments were sent the previous week. At this point the customer was having £63.56 deducted from her UC award, as there was rent arrears, there were still no payments going direct to the landlord.

The officer applied for a Discretionary Assistance Fund emergency payment and issued a foodbank voucher. This case was escalated through the Department for Works & Pensions, who advised that the payments had been made the week before, again the officer stated that no payments had been received and submitted an up to date rent statement as proof of this.

The arrears which were £780.00 were caused by the delay in the UC housing costs which lasted three months, and although no housing costs were being paid but they were deducting £63.56 for rent arrears, leaving the customer in financial hardship, a Discretionary Housing Payment was discussed and a budget plan completed, it was agreed that when there was housing costs in payment a DHP would cover the shortfall in the rent for a period of six months to further help the customer. The officer again escalated this issue to a DWP manager, three days later the payments were received by the landlord and a DHP was put into payment.

This could have been avoided by the service centre being aware of what the discrepancy actually was and having a time frame in which this would be resolved keeping the customer informed and updated.

Mr S Case Study

Customer and his wife are new benefit claimants and applied to claim UC, they rent a house from the Local Authority.

Chronology of events and issues with UC claim:

Customer had housing costs verified with UC, the landlord completed a social rented sector form with the correct amount of rent and service charges being paid. When the customer received his first UC breakdown the Housing Element was incorrect and higher than the rent. Customer contacted UC to advise.

The customer attended a PBS appointment, UC were contacted who advised that this was correct amount as per the verification received. After rechecking the UC breakdown again against the Rent Verification form, it was noticed that the service charges were included in the housing costs calculation. This was escalated to the DWP, to be re checked. The response from the DWP came back that the calculation was correct, the rent statement was submitted and the customer was becoming increasingly stressed.

There had been no contact from the DWP for two months, this was escalated a third time, the following week there was a positive response from the DWP. The housing costs had been miscalculated and there would be a overpayment of £125.00 the customer attended a second PBS session the DWP Debt Management line was contacted to arrange a lower recovery rate of the Overpayment and a budget plan was completed.

What was learnt from this particular case study was ineligible service items were not deducted by Universal Credit.