

Welfare Reform Strategy – detailed offer

Within the objectives and general approach outlined in the report, the strategy will have a number of interrelated strands each with a number of specific deliverables and a defined customer offer:-

1. Advice and awareness

The preferred method of providing information to the majority of claimants will be digitally. The Council will provide:-

- A central information hub – on the Council’s website – providing regularly updated general advice, case studies, better off calculations etc; all other communications – electronic where possible – will direct residents to the information held on the website
- Targeted advice to those at risk of the OBC or specific aspects of UC (eg requiring bank accounts) – principally delivered via electronic means (texting, email, twitter)
- Provision of a basic “welfare reform health check”: (eg Are you receiving the increased minimum wage? Will you be capped? Do you have the necessary digital / budgeting skills? etc);
- Publicity regarding claiming benefits and reporting changes promptly (to avoid losing out from changed backdating rules, etc)
- Publicised pathways to partner services
- A toolkit of information and materials (presentations, leaflet designs etc) for partner and community organisations in order that they can deliver key messages to users of their services

2. Employment & skills offer

- The ‘Brent Works’ offer, including;
 - Job and apprenticeship brokerage
 - CV writing, interview skills
 - Adult education / work-focused courses
- Place-based support:
 - The Living Room (St Raphael’s) offer
 - Other place-based provision, such as Hyde Housing employment support in Stonebridge, or Catalyst Housing in Church End.
- Specialist support:
 - Referrals can be made by Brent Works to a wider range of specialist support (through the CVS or private providers), such as responding to mental health needs.

3. Debt and budgeting advice

The offer will include:-

- Referral to partner agencies providing support and assistance via the Council's new model for independent advice and guidance services in Brent
- Signposting to the 'single brand' digital advice gateway providing independent advice on Money and Debt (as well as Employment, Housing, Benefits, Immigration, Health and Wellbeing)
- Referral where appropriate to an appropriate provider for further support.

4. Integrated Customer Service Centre (CSC) offer

While the overall emphasis is on providing messages digitally without claimants needing to come into the CSC, those that do visit provide an opportunity to further disseminate information. The CSC offer will include:-

- The establishment of a permanent triage service combining benefits, employment and housing advice
- All relevant CSC interviews (eg Benefits, Housing Needs) to provide information on routes out of unemployment and / or referrals to a specialist employment advisor
- A front-line "welfare reform health check" to identify whether claimant likely to be affected by the reforms; whether their wages are below minimum wage, etc - with appropriate advice
- Claimants on benefit identified as having eight weeks' rent arrears, referred to Housing Needs for homeless prevention and to Employment advisors
- The CSC to provide resources for claimants to self-serve and also seek specialist advice via public and voluntary sector partners on a co-located or surgery basis, including JCP, CAB, Brent Start, Brent Works, etc
- Information-gathering of claimant need via front-line staff to target assistance and information at a later date

5. Housing strategy

The Housing offer will principally include:-

- Proactive work with "at risk" households to prevent homelessness by negotiation with the landlord. If it is not possible to prevent claimants from being evicted, advice will be given to help them secure alternative accommodation.
- For those who cannot afford to live in Brent, assistance in relocating to areas outside of Brent where cheaper accommodation is more readily available
- For those unable to afford to live in self-contained accommodation (eg single claimants aged over 35 in private sector accommodation), information provided about accessing shared accommodation.
- For claimants living in social housing and affected by the "bedroom tax", access to a financial incentive to move to a smaller property.

6. Financial assistance for those most in need

Various forms of financial assistance will be available for the most vulnerable residents:-

- DHP for housing costs / rent shortfalls (subject to funding) – help if claimants have to move house or while they are attempting to find work; help with the bedroom tax for the most vulnerable claimants who are unable to downsize (as in current policy)
- LWA – the Council will review the scheme to look at alternative approaches that provide the most appropriate sustainable support for residents in crisis, with a view to working more closely with partners and / or within the community
- CTS –
 - current scheme maintained into 2016/17 despite cuts in other welfare benefits
 - review of scheme for 2017/18 to ensure the Council's financial resources are targeted at those most in need

Due to their specific nature, having greater clarity of the cohorts affected and mitigating actions which can be taken, OBC and UC will have more specific mitigation action plans:-

7. Overall Benefit Cap – specific activity

- (a) OBC mitigation will include general awareness-raising, followed by a targeted, segmented approach:-
- Prevention for impacts in the PRS – advance publicity / work through partners
 - Mitigation for claimants in Temporary Accommodation in line with TA strategy
 - Assistance to Social Rented Sector partners to work with / mitigate impacts for their own tenants (eg providing data to BHP and RSL welfare or income collection teams)
- (b) Mitigation / engagement plans will also to be segmented by claimant type, eg-
- different messages to JSA, ESA, IS claimants who may differ in their closeness to the employment market, eg:-
 - those who can self-serve to find work
 - those nearly job-ready requiring minimal support
 - those who are unlikely to be able to find work and may need a housing solution
 - focused support for the most vulnerable claimants or those likely to be priority need, generally speaking those on ESA or IS rather than JSA

- (c) A joint approach with JCP will be proposed, including:-
 - Discussion of housing issues at work-focussed interview
 - Potential co-location in CSC on surgery or broader basis
- (d) There will also be signposting to Brent Advice Matters; other generalist or specific advice – CAB, Drug action team, faith groups, food banks and other WR network partners – and potential links to licensed HMO landlords to provide signposting for single homeless (non-statutory)

8. Universal Credit – specific activity

The UC rollout plan will include:-

- (a) Targeted awareness as different cohorts go live (subject to DWP rollout plans)
- (b) Targeted advice to specific cohorts –
 - Claimants with post office accounts (853) who need to set up new bank accounts
 - Claimants currently on direct payments to landlords (18,198)
 - Advice provided to claimants moving from HB to UC regarding how they need to deal with UC in future (currently about 15 per month)
- (c) Landlords
 - To conduct a Direct Payment pilot in the social sector
 - To engage with the private sector to sustain PRS properties for claimants for as long as possible

(There are potentially conflicting objectives between different landlord cohorts; RSL's may be keen to trial direct payments so they can gear up their rent collection procedures in advance of UC implementation. However, in the private sector, UC is likely to be viewed very differently and potentially – along with OBC – as a further reason for landlords to exit the Benefits rental market.)

- (d) To negotiate with DWP (via the Delivery Partnership Agreement, or Universal Support – Delivered Locally mechanisms) for adequate provision for local needs including personal budgeting advice.
- (e). Segmentation of caseload and identification of needs regarding digital ability, budgeting skills, employment advice, and signposting of claimants to appropriate agencies for assistance. Extent partially dependant on DWP funding)