

Universal Credit - Local Support Services Framework

Oxford City Council's Response

Oxford City Council is pleased that the framework document recognises:

- some people will need extra support transitioning from the current system to UC,
- that telephony and face to face services need to continue to be available for those that need them,
- that alternative payment arrangements will be needed for some customers, and
- that local authorities are key partners in the roll out of Universal Credit.

However, we would urge you to reflect on the following issues:

A basis for planning

- For the framework to provide a basis on which LAs can start to plan services and workforce requirements it is vital that timeframes are clear, realistic and deliverable. The late notification of changes and lack of clarity around the phasing of the implementation, as experienced to date; creates uncertainty and insecurity for both residents and LA staff. To effectively plan services, and encourage residents to engage it is essential the timetable and phasing are crystallised as soon as possible.
- To inform Councils medium term financial planning processes, 'mark 2' of the document must be issued no later than October 2013 and provide sufficient detail on the phasing of the implementation, funding available and associated payment mechanisms.
- The framework should embrace the localism agenda and provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate a range of local delivery arrangements from the onset, recognising that these may morph over time. It should not seek to de-stabilise what may prove to be very effective partnership arrangements by introducing new requirements in the short to medium term (3 – 5 yrs), as this would simply introduce unnecessary instability and uncertainty into the system.

Building on existing services

- For the DWP to ensure effective working relationships are maintained with social landlords and that benefit claimants are supported in maintaining their tenancies it is vital that data sharing between the DWP and Social landlords is in place and that it is timely and effective. Learning from Oxford City Council's Direct Payment pilot indicates understanding the timing and termination of benefit payments is essential in this.
- Similarly the Council's Direct Payments pilot shows that the ability to agree 'exceptional' payment arrangements is necessary in approximately 2 % of cases. Clarity about the criteria and process for agreeing such arrangements with the DWP going forward is therefore key.

Services to support the new features of UC

- The framework states that 'it does not include statutory work services supportThis will continue to be provided by the DWP and Work Programme providers'. Oxford City Council would like to see a full evaluation of the WP's effectiveness to date before the DWP takes a firm position on this, as anecdotal evidence from the City Council's UC pilot indicates that locally the programme has not been effective.

Funding

- Experience from the City Council' Direct Payments and UC pilot projects indicate that the level of support required to enable effective transition to UC is very labour intensive. Consequently, Delivery Partnerships will require some up front funding to set up effect arrangements.
- It should also be noted that without effective data sharing with social landlords, the transaction costs of rent collection will increase significantly, effectively creating a 'new burden' for those local authorities like Oxford which retain their stock. This will need to be funded by the DWP.