



## MAKING WANDSWORTH A UNIVERSAL CREDIT SUPPORT FLAGSHIP BOROUGH

As Universal Credit (UC) continues to be rolled out across Wandsworth Borough, four local charities are calling for urgent action to ensure local people receive the support they need so that no one becomes homeless as a result of needing to claim Universal Credit. Good progress has been made this year, with the establishment of a monthly UC Stakeholder Group meeting and briefing event for local agencies in February. We now have the chance to build on this and put in place the support to help people with the new benefit and avoid the problems that have been experienced elsewhere. Our ambition should be that Wandsworth is a flagship for UC support – in the same way the borough has responded to the advice needs of local EU Nationals unsure about the impact of Brexit.

More than 70% of council tenants on Universal Credit are currently in rent arrears in the eight London boroughs where UC has rolled out – accounting for nearly 10,000 people, and leaving them at risk of eviction and homelessness.<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include people renting from housing associations or private landlords, so the true number of people affected will be even greater.

Citizens Advice Wandsworth, Katherine Low Settlement, Southwest London Law Centres and Wandsworth Foodbank believe that together, with the support of the DWP and Wandsworth Council, we can reduce the risk of local residents facing rent arrears, eviction, homelessness and hardship, and be a flagship borough leading the way in excellent support for people claiming UC.

Together, the charities are calling for:

- 1. Equality and consistency of access to high-quality advice and tailored support – including computer support to make and manage UC claims, debt advice and casework – for all Wandsworth residents claiming Universal Credit, whether they claim UC at Lambeth Jobcentres (45% of Wandsworth claimants) or Wandsworth Jobcentre (55% of Wandsworth claimants). This support will require additional funding.**

In other areas of UC roll-out, problems with rent arrears and debt associated with the length of time it takes for UC to be paid, is causing financial hardship, stress and anxiety for many. Similarly, the need to manage a UC claim online – ‘self-service’ – can be difficult for people not used to using computers for work or who do not have internet access at home, and for many who have learning disabilities or mental health difficulties.

We welcome the temporary agreement during March 2018 for Advising Communities to provide Universal Support for Wandsworth residents claiming Universal Credit at Streatham and Stockwell jobcentres. We also welcome the recent funding settlement between DWP and Wandsworth Council to procure Universal Support for Wandsworth residents in 2018-19, whether people are claiming at Lambeth or Wandsworth jobcentres.

However many UC claimants need tailored one-to-one hands-on support. This runs beyond existing Universal Support, which only provides minimal Personal Budgeting and Digital Support – approximately two hours per person for each – and does not include much-needed debt, benefits or housing advice and case-work, or ongoing hands-on digital support to successfully maintain a UC claim.

Adequate funding from the Council and/or DWP is needed for advice services, and to increase access to computers and hands-on digital support to help people apply for Universal Credit online, and to check and update their journal regularly once their claim is in place. We should ensure equal access to housing and council tax advice, Discretionary Housing Payments, and homelessness mitigation, for residents whether they are council, housing association or private-rented tenants.

Voluntary effort could help. With funding from Wandsworth Council and DWP, local voluntary agencies could purchase or hire computer equipment and train volunteers to provide ongoing digital support to people, particularly those who are vulnerable, to help them successfully manage their UC claim.

Assistance should be available at accessible locations – which could include libraries, community centres and job centres.

**2. Wandsworth Council to widen its eligibility criteria for crisis help to include people experiencing benefit problems, and to increase its resources for its Discretionary Social Fund, to ensure that more Wandsworth residents have access to this emergency financial resource in the year ahead.**

Currently Wandsworth residents are only eligible to apply for a crisis grant from the Council's Discretionary Social Fund if they are in receipt and payment of qualifying benefits. This policy deliberately excludes anyone in financial crisis because of problems with benefit payments (eg delays and changes to payment, including minimum five-week wait for Universal Credit). In 2016-17, Wandsworth Council refused one-third of crisis applications in 2016-17 because they related to benefit problems, and this figure does not include the unrecorded number of people advised not to apply in the first place, because they don't meet eligibility criteria around benefits.

In 2016-17, one-quarter of all Foodbank referrals in the borough were from Wandsworth Council (20%) or Job Centre Plus (6%), demonstrating that crisis intervention is needed but that local charities are often plugging the holes in the local safety net. During the same period, the Council spent only 64% of its Discretionary Social Fund to help local residents in crisis (an average award of £73 per household), and the DSF has been consistently underspent since it began in 2013. Similarly, of £1,238,936 Wandsworth Council received from government for Discretionary Housing Payment in 2016-17, 18% (£226, 929) remained unspent.

**3. Wandsworth Council to monitor, and co-ordinate local monitoring, of the impact of Universal Credit in the Borough and publish it at least quarterly.**

It is vital that we monitor how well people are coping with the roll-out of UC, the impact it is having on local services and the extent to which UC is achieving its policy objective for local people. We welcome the Council's recent agreement in principle to this, and we look forward to working together with the Council and DWP to agree what data will be monitored going forward. We should ensure that monitoring is designed and conducted to ensure consistency with monitoring carried out in other boroughs so that it enables comparison of experience.

Phil Jew, Citizens Advice Wandsworth  
Aaron Barbour, Katherine Low Settlement  
Patrick Marples, Southwest London Law Centres  
Sarah Chapman, Dan Frith, Wandsworth Foodbank

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<sup>i</sup> [Source: BBC 28/02/2018](#)