

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Response to Universal Credit Local Support Services Framework

To: Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform

By: e-mail to localservices.framework@dwp.gsi.gov.uk on 13 March 2013

Dear Lord Freud

Thank you for your invitation to express comments on the Universal Credit Local Support Services Framework set out in the document published in February.

Initially we must say the Council welcomes the opportunity to have a part in the process of design in the delivery of this new benefit. For some time we have held concerns over perceived shortcomings in the delivery of Universal Credit, especially around those more vulnerable residents in our Borough and we have raised this with Government.

At this point in time, armed with little detail and at short notice, we are unable to say exactly how this Council would respond to the framework in the area. However, we most certainly support the fundamental principles set out in the document.

In order to form a comprehensive response we would like to know some parameters to work within. The framework seems complete in identifying categories of claimants who need support, the type of support they may require and to some extent, who should provide it and how. We have no doubt that if these criteria were used and pro-active services developed to totally meet all needs identified and agreed outcomes, then the introduction and on-going delivery of Universal Credit would be near seamless. But realistically, although the funding model principles are descriptive, they do little to assist decisions in planning for phase 2 of the Universal Credit programme. We are sure you will have a figure in mind to work to. An indication of this would be of great use and enable us to make sound proposals.

As you are probably well aware, although the claimant categories identified at Annex C of the document represent the minority of Universal Credit claimants, they require a significantly disproportionate level of intense support compared to the 'everyday' claim, making these the 'costly' claims. This must be recognized when considering funding.

We would also add that a better time to make such a response would be when more information has flowed from the 12 Local Authority led Universal Credit pilot sites, the Direct Payment Demonstration pilots and perhaps even the early roll-out Universal Credit Pathfinder sites. We would have more confidence in stating our needs and further to this we would be better placed to make decisions around the most effective use and development of resources with this information to hand. The timing is not ideal.

Along with an indication of actual funding available, we would like to have seen a statement of intended commitment to the framework proposal. The development of local partnerships certainly relies on commitment from those parties involved. Most 3rd Sector organisations are experiencing shrinking funds and financial support, to expect them to buy-in, gear-up and sign-up to local partnership agreements on a 'say so' will be a risk too far for many, causing a reluctance to participate and hamper operations.

Another concern we have identified is the possibility of such a framework to become a drain on resource through 'over administration' and prescribed management information requirements. It is essential that management of a multi-tiered framework such as this has efficiency at its heart and is not weighed down, drained or constrained through administration.

On the whole, the framework sets out what we locally already know and what already happens. We see how we best use that local knowledge and expertise to meet desired outcomes, together with the right level of financial support, as being crucial to the success of Universal Credit delivery.

Again, thank you for the opportunity of this response, we trust it will be of help.

Yours sincerely,

Nicolas Heslop

Leader of the Council

Julie Beilby

Chief Executive