



**Customer Scrutiny  
Panel report  
Universal Credit -  
2018**



## Meet the Panel

### Introduction

The Customer Scrutiny Panel (the Panel) is made up of customers who have been working with whg since 2015 to achieve the shared aim of improving the services we provide to our customers.

The Scrutiny Panel have been responsible for examining and scrutinising whg's services from a customer perspective and making recommendations to our Board on how best to improve these services for our customers. Customer Scrutiny provides the following benefits:

- Ensuring the Customer Voice is represented in our services
- Providing the opportunity for our customers to participate in shaping our services
- Monitoring review recommendations
- Compliance with our regulatory standards.

### Statement from our Chair Ken Beck

"It's great to see that whg recognises what impact Universal Credit could have on their customers, we have been pleased with the preparation and hard work carried out by all whg colleagues involved. Our review is now complete and the other members and I are very grateful for all of the time, help and support Sarah Johnson, Jaz Kaur, Joanne Cole and their teams have given us. Thank you!"



**Ken Beck**



**Shafeen Khan**



**John Bailey**

## Why this review?

Universal Credit (UC) is a largescale reform to the benefit system, which will integrate all means tested benefits and tax credits for working aged adults. It aims to simplify and streamline the benefits system, improve work incentives, tackle poverty among low income families and reduce the scope for error and fraud.

UC will represent a huge change to whg customers. It will change the way customers receive benefits to help with housing costs and for the majority it will change the way that they pay rent to whg. This will involve a behavioural change from our customers as well as changes within whg to ensure we can manage these changes. The move to UC is a considerable concern for customers and the risk to whg is significant.

The Panel considered what these changes meant and felt it was appropriate to look at what whg is doing to prepare itself and its customers for the introduction of UC.

## The Scrutiny Process

The methodology of the review into UC involved the following activities:

- An introduction to UC (Presentation)
- An overview of UC (Presentation)
- A review of communication channels (Desk top review)
- A review of policy and process (Desk top review)
- Shadowing
- Reviewing customer survey results. (Desk top review)

This review document has detailed each part of the activities into three separate sections:

- A Summary
- Best Practice
- Findings.



## An overview of Universal Credit



### Summary

The Income and Residential Property Manager and the Service Manager, delivered a presentation to the Panel. This included an overview of:

- UC
- Income Collection
- The arrears management process
- Internal signposting services and current claimant
- A Q&A session.

The Panel were keen to get an understanding of the following:

- How UC is explained to customers
- What methods of communication we use to engage with our customers
- What impact UC will have on whg customers and colleagues
- What support is available to our most vulnerable customers.



### Good Practice

The Panel liked the breadth and quality of advice offered to customers which included the following:

- Preventing and dealing with rent arrears, welfare benefit advice and financial inclusion.
- Extensive training given to colleagues for Welfare Reform
- Good use of social media and magazine content to highlight the importance of Rent First and UC.
- Strong internal processes for managing UC.



## Summary

- UC customers do not get housing benefits; they receive a housing element within their award
- To manage increased demand in UC claims, whg is creating new internal system changes to improve workflow tasks and reporting
- whg supports vulnerable customers by using the welfare reform impact assessment which is a data exchange between whg and Walsall Council that shows customers vulnerable to financial distress
- whg Money Advisors actively engage with vulnerable customers to ensure they are receiving assistance to maximise their income and prepare them for UC and assist them with any debt issues
- The Money Advisors have regular training to keep up to date on welfare changes and the impact this can have on our customers which includes the welfare system, ESA, PIP etc.
- A link between whg and DWP is in place to support customers who request alternative payment arrangements
- whg has launched a behavioural change campaign called Rent First for customers and colleagues
- Colleagues have received training on Rent First, to educate customers on the importance of prioritising rent with the introduction of direct payments to customers
- Customers who are not paying towards additional credit on their account are sent a Rent First letter. The Income Collection Team then discusses rent in advance at every opportunity where the rent account is not complying with the tenancy agreement
- Communicating with customers via text message was tested; this caused some confusion and concern due to a technical issue. As a result, whg has stopped using text messaging until further work has been completed
- The Service manager monitors the feedback received from customers and uses it to ensure that the customer voice is being used to drive service improvements.

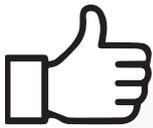


## Communication with customers



### Summary

The Panel reviewed all of the communication channels and the way in which we promote the Rent First Campaign. This involved reviewing our website to understand the type of information available to customers, along with other channels such as magazines, booklets etc.



### Good Practice

The Panel felt whg communicated the Rent First Campaign well to customers via traditional channels of communication including phone, statements, letters and the customer magazine. A variety of digital channels have also been used which include the website and whg is making good use of social media to inform customers about benefit changes.

whg is using a wide range of media to ensure that the messages about UC and the support available is reaching our customers. The Panel felt that the Rent First content was easy to read and understand.

**“ The Rent First content was easy to read and understand”**





## Findings

- The information on the website was easy to read and understand
- Plenty of advice on the website which includes:
  - An online budgeting calculator
  - Information on how to get ahead of rent and the impacts of UC taking around four weeks to process.
  - Information about bank accounts
  - Information about secure passwords for UC online use
  - How to set up a direct debit
  - Click Start; providing help and support
- Money Advice availability
- Help/How to call Income Collection for support if unable to make a rent payment
- Useful videos Video Links:
  - 'How to claim Universal Credit online'
  - YouTube videos explaining what Universal Credit is and how it will work
- Regular social media updates
- Customer digital footprint is to be captured via the new customer portal alongside a customer survey
- BME customers receive information about welfare benefit and appropriate support, however, whg has limited options available for our BME customers who would like different language options.

## Policies



### Summary

whg has two main policies relating to income and rent management, advice and support. These are the:

- Welfare Benefits and Debt Advice Policy
- Income Collection Policy.

The Panel reviewed these policies to understand the key principles and the impact these policies have on our customers.

The Panel also reviewed whg's accreditations bid submission to the Rent Income Excellence Network (RIEN). The accreditation lasts for three years, with annual reviews being carried out to ensure the accreditation standards continue to be met. The RIEN reviews our progress against the recommendations from the original assessment report.



### Good Practice

The Panel felt that the contents of the policies were written clearly and comprehensive.

- The policies contain clear processes for collecting rents and shows clear signs of providing support to customers
- whg has performance monitoring arrangements in place
- whg adopts good practice and performance benchmarking with other Housing Associations
- Legal action is quite clear in relation to arrears
- whg's Money Advice Service extends to CAB, Walsave, DWP
- Affordability checks are carried out for new customers
- Customer responsibilities are highlighted and explained well
- A Policy review (of the whole policy) is carried out every three years
- All payment agreements are set up to make sure customers can afford payment plans
- Agreements are flexible and can be reviewed at any point if customer circumstances change.



## Findings

- There were 818 referrals to the Money Advice Service.
- The Midlands Best Practice Group met in May 2018. whg colleagues regularly visit other Housing Associations to share best practice.
- The Panel reviewed the examples of the affordability check. If a customer is refused as part of the affordability check the customer is signposted to the Money Advice Team for further support.
- whg requires customers to make weekly rent payments in advance. Customers can elect a different payment frequency and advice will be given to ensure customers comply with their tenancy agreement.
- The Panel requested evidence that payment options are reviewed and explained carefully to customers including vulnerable customers. This was not provided due to the difficulty in evidencing this.
- All former rent accounts are reviewed and a decision to write off any debt that no longer economical to pursue is made.

***“ The policies contain clear processes for collecting rents and shows clear signs of providing support to customers ”***



## Shadowing



### Summary

The Panel shadowed the Assistant Manager in the Income and Residential Property Team; the Assistant Manager went in to great detail about income management, welfare benefits and debt advice. This involved:

- Reviewing KPIs and performance measures
- An overview of how the teams work together
- Q&A.



### Good Practice

- The way the stages of recovery and number of weeks that customers are in debt is very clear and well set out and accessible.
- The way the teams are set up to quickly identify, help and support customers experiencing debt issues.



### Findings

- The recent changes that have been implemented in relation to recording whg's data allows for a targeted approach to assist customers who are getting into difficulties.

## Customer Survey



### Summary

Two surveys were conducted to measure the impact of the Rent First campaign. These surveys were designed to get an understanding of if the campaign is educating whg's customers about Rent First.



### Good Practice

- whg are taking steps to measure the performance and impact of the Rent First Campaign.



### Findings

The Panel reviewed the 2018 Rent First survey results and compared them to the results captured in 2017. Survey questions were asked to customers on incoming phone calls into the contact centre. 1997 Customers surveyed in 2018 and 2106 in 2017

In 2018, **9%** of customers surveyed were aware of Rent First, and **91%** were not. This is a slight improvement from the results from 2017 where only **3%** of customers were aware and **97%** were not

Based on these survey results the panel felt the Rent First campaign has not been successful in achieving the goal of educating a large number of customers about the important of rent first and the impact that UC can have. However, the way in which customers were surveyed was not focused on customers impacted by UC.

### Concluding remarks

Overall, the Panel are pleased with the work that whg has done and continues to do to help customers who will be switching to UC and those who already have. The Panel commends the way in which whg has communicated with customers via the website, social media, magazine and post. The Panel felt that the way in which whg engages and supports with BME customers could be improved.

whg's performance in relation to income management has been good and compares well with other Housing Associations. However, it is early days for whg in terms of UC roll out. This will grow significantly in the coming months and it will be interesting to see the impact that this has on rent arrears levels and income collection going forward.

***“The Panel were pleased with the work that whg has done and continues to do to help customers who will be switching to UC”***

Review the survey approach

More information and options for BME customers

Ensure Rent First is a key element of the digital roll out

Ensure Rent First is aimed at customers likely impacted by UC

Create an interactive UC area roll-out map for customers