**Tower Hamlets Welfare Rights Advisors Information Exchange**

**Welfare Rights Advisors Forum 30/3/2017 Minutes**

**1.**    **Housing Benefit - Steve Hill**

a)    Anticipate lots of problems with the introduction of Universal Credit in Tower Hamlets.  Out of 300 single people UC claims they found that 100 were incorrect.  Poplar and City office have now gone to full service UC (not E2), there is one service centre (Canterbury) dealing with Tower Hamlets but HB will not be given full access to the JC+ service centre (ie direct line/internet contact) so Tower Hamlets has not agreed to take up funding for ‘processing support’ (ie online help to claim/personal budgeting support) as they felt needs to be a ‘partnership’ and them not being given full access to UC they cannot see this could qualify as such.  HB has been told that claimants will get help with making claims and budgeting support if they attend the benefit agency in person.  The TH funding for this has therefore not been paid out but Steve will try and encourage the advice sector getting it if possible

**\*Action** (Jo to contact DWP again)

         Fatima concerned about delays in ‘date of claim’

         Shofu said the Alternative Payment Arrangement is already not working

         List of triggers for moving from legacy benefits is attached

b)    Changes to council tax reduction – attachment confirms but important bits

         Non-dependents deduction – major changes to income to this

         Capital – above £6k won’t qualify (was £16K)

         Self-employed earnings will be calculated at minimum wage X 35 hours after 12 months self-employment even if earnings are less than this (same rule applies to UC)

c)    DHP still exists and UC claimants can still claim this

d)    Crisis Support Grants are still available, unfortunately they have not completed the written ‘policy’ as yet but the draft one is being developed and will be sent for consultation prior to re will be one soon, they are aiming to go for a cashless system in future i.e. being give food/furniture.

**2.**    **Benefit Changes – CPAG power point and benefit change timetable summary is attached**

a)    Two child limit (attached information) – new claims for CTC and UC (and personal allowances on housing benefit) will no longer have increases for 3rd  or more children.  Children born before 6/4/2017 are not affected, some exceptions to the rule (multiple births/adoption/non parental care arrangement/rape or coercive relationships) – transitional protection details attached

b)    Over 2 children claimants will not be transferred to UC at present they will remain on legacy benefits until 1/11/2018

c)    Work Related Activity Group component abolished from 3/4/2017 (ESA and UC) – there are some claimants who will have transitional protection (see attached power point) but no new claims will have WRAG addition

d)    Family element/premium removed from new claims CTC and UC

e)    Bereavement Benefit changes – Bereavement Support Payment, payments only made for 18 months maximum.  2 rates: higher if entitled to Child Benefit (or pregnant) £350 pm; standard if no dependents. Lump sum increases to £3,500 for higher rate applicants and £2,500 for standard

f)     Universal Credit -

         Full service for Universal Credit starts by following post code areas

  E14 and E3 on 22nd February

  E1, E1W, EC2, EC3, EC4 on 29th March

  E2 not until June 2018 (Hoxton area)

        Online claims process, all new benefit claims AND change of circumstances in Full Service Area will claim UC (except over 2 children). Claim is made then have to attend a meeting with ‘work coach’ to discuss ‘conditionality’, its really important that claimants self-disclose caring for children/disabled people, having come out of care/prison, disability, health, addiction or any other vulnerability issues as they may miss out on waiting days, exemptions and alternative payment arrangements.  If they do self-disclose, their claimant commitment should be reflect their situation (Claimant Commitment is the DWP/claimants written agreement that outlines agreed steps to improve prospects or look for work)

Advisors discussed whether their agency had any policy on assisting their clients with universal credit – most agreed that advisors shouldn’t assist with making claims.  Claims are made on line (although can phone claims), they are taking around 2 or more hours to do.  The Job Centre Plus have confirmed that they will assist claimants to do the application, that there are computers available in benefit offices that can be used to make claims and support given where claimants find it difficult.  Steven Hanshaw has stated that he would like details of any problems.  It was agreed that agencies should wherever possible NOT help with UC, that clients should be referred to Dod Street, City Tower Job Centre Plus offices.  Where advisors have completed a UC for a client they should notify Stephen Hanshaw of the clients details and why the client has been unable to do the claim themselves.

**\*Action** Jo to do a letter for advice centres/advisors to use for clients that need help to do UC claim.  This will be a referral letter for clients to take to the JCP

**NOTE This is attached**.

We should email a copy of this to Stephen Hanshaw STEPHEN.HANSHAW@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK  also every time we do an UC claim for a client keep details of client (please copy me in and I’ll keep a list/record jo.ellis@island-advice.org.uk)

3.    **Referrals to Tower Hamlets Specialist Welfare Rights Caseworkers**

**Legal Advice Centre**: Only take referrals for appeals when got the appeal bundle, not Mandatory Reconsideration.  Otherwise can be ‘signposted’ (i.e. send client to drop in advice session) for assistance. Referrals can be emailed to admin@legaladvicecentre.org - they will email back to confirm that clients have been booked – full guidance available on [www.thcan.org.uk/advice-agencies-information/](http://www.thcan.org.uk/advice-agencies-information/#_blank)

**Law Centre**: Chris Parsons very limited capacity but to email or phone him, has no particular criteria c.parsons@thlc.org.uk

**Island Advice**: Tower Hamlets clients only, limited casework and usually all appointments are taken up through our drop in advice session clients but can try by email  steph@island-advice.org.uk  or phone direct line 020 7538 0094 (phone number is for advisors only). Clients can ring 0207 987 9379

**CAB** advisor Eukay email eukandu@eastendcab.org.uk. Also their full drop in services sessions are available on: [www.thcan.org.uk/advice-agencies-information/](http://www.thcan.org.uk/advice-agencies-information/#_blank)