

Briefing Note LCC spend on food and UC Impacts.

Since the 16 March 2020 and in response to Covid-19, the Council established and chairs a weekly financial inclusion meeting and an emergency food provision meeting. Both meetings are inclusive of internal and external partners and help to plan and develop a collaborative approach for the city.

These meetings have helped raise awareness of the emerging issues being faced by residents and service providers. This briefing note brings together the latest available evidence from the meetings, particularly on the rise in claims to universal credit (UC), its linkages to the rise in requests for food aid and the financial impact this is having on the Council.

Key figures

Headline figures detailed in this report reveal there were:

- 35,500 Leeds Claimants to UC pre-covid, average 650 claims a week
- 17,000 new claimants to UC in Leeds since 16th March, average over 4,000 claims a week.
- 3,500 residents that have requested a deferment to repay Council Tax
- 1,700 new claims to Council Tax Support
- 1,600 more LCC Housing Tenants claiming UC
- 7,700 calls answered on the Covid-19 helpline
- 3,000 calls answered by LWSS
- 1,100 food parcels delivered in one day, 200 of which to the homeless
- £66,000 of food purchased for food provision
- £70,000 of food donated
- £62,000 spent on supermarket vouchers (£30k to be paid back)

Universal Credit in Leeds.

Leeds official UC figures for March have been released, but these are only up to 16/03/20, and do not cover the spike due to Covid 19. Nationally, the DWP have taken over 1.5 million claims since 16 March 2020, and are on course to pay over 93% of all customers in full.

In December 2019 there were 31,021 UC claimants in Leeds, this has increased each month to 35,552 in March 2020.

All DWP offices have seen at least a 500% increase in their numbers of new claims since 16th March. The latest unofficial figures for Leeds, which are not currently in the wider public domain provide an indication of the huge increase in claims since the pandemic took effect in the UK.

Unofficial UC Claim registrations in Leeds:

- W/E 15/03 just over 650 (an average week, pre Covid-19)
- W/E 22/03 just over 3640
- W/E 29/03 just over 6400
- W/E 05/04 Just over 4400
- W/E 12/04 Just over 2850

Since 16th March, over 17,000 new claims to UC have been made to Leeds, averaging at 4,300 new claims a week.

To cope with the demand, DWP have moved over 10,000 staff nationally internally to support the claims process and worked overtime over the Easter weekend and the following Saturday, the bulk of the work is now up to date, and the DWP report that only a small proportion of customers should be adversely delayed in receiving their 1st payment on time at the end of their assessment period.

Leeds DWP offices are currently working together to clear what work remains and staff seconded and allocated to claims work, away from their normal role will be supporting this work for the foreseeable future. This is to ensure the DWP are able to focus on priorities of processing & paying benefit to customers.

Many UC processes have been relaxed to enable smoother & quicker payments, while recovery of benefit overpayments & the process of entitlement , together with access to advance payments ,have either been suspended or enhanced to support as many customers as possible during this time.

Impact of UC on Advice Services

Discussions with advice service partners within Citizens Advice have revealed calls regarding welfare benefits and UC queries are the top issue, making up 47% of enquiries, employment enquiries make up 18% of all enquiry calls (10% more than the usual rate) and Debt calls make up 11% of enquiries. Concerns have also been raised regarding equality groups accessing the UC Help to Claim helpline, as advice services have shifted to telephone and online support, and away from face to face. There is emerging evidence that low income groups and BME groups are having difficulties accessing support in this way due to language barriers and using pay and go mobiles to access helplines.

Impact on Housing and Council Tax

Residents are entitled to request up to a 3 month council tax deferments for those financially affected by the pandemic and reschedule payments over the financial year.

The Council is working with residents to ensure customers understand that they should only seek deferment if they cannot afford repayments, and is encouraging customers who can afford to pay to continue as normal. Latest data has shown that 3,500 Leeds residents have applied for the 3 month deferment to repay later in the year. There have also been 1,700 new claims for Council Tax Support since Covid-19.

The Council's Housing service is working to support tenants that get into financial difficulty by suspending normal recovery action for 3 months, and give advice and support to claim appropriate benefits to assist tenants with paying rent. Since Covid-19, the Housing Income team have seen large increase in their tenants claiming UC, with cases increasing by 1600 and have noted rental income has fallen by £400,000 on the same time last year.

LCC Contact Centre Evidence of UC's Impact

There are currently two helplines in place to arrange emergency food provision, connecting to one service to supply food:

- Local Welfare Support Scheme (LWSS) – providing access to food by food vouchers and parcels and also gives access to white/brown goods. The access to white/brown goods has been suspended temporarily to allow LWSS to focus on food provision during the pandemic.

- COVID-19 helpline – This is a new service, focused on providing support to people who are unable to leave the house, including support with food and non-food related issues.

Emerging evidence and themes being discussed by customers to the Council's Local Welfare Support Service has revealed customers are:

- Using more gas and electricity, due to self-isolating and UC is not stretching as far.
- Using more food due to self-isolating so UC not stretching as far, and the cheaper brands are no longer available in supermarkets due to panic buying issues.
- Using more food as children are not getting school meals and are at home throughout the day.
- Lost income due to displaying symptoms and having to self-isolate for 14 days.
- Lost hours at work or job entirely due to coronavirus and 5 week gap between submitting UC application and receiving first payment.

Latest data from the Covid-19 helpline has revealed that from 23 March to 21 April, 7,719 calls have been answered. In addition to this 2,959 calls were answered by the LWSS helpline (from 31 March to 22 April).

Food Distributed from the warehouse and schools

The Council opened a new warehouse facility designed to provide a central location in Leeds for food storage and distribution, linking fleet vehicles and drivers for food deliveries and collections. This larger premises allows food to be packaged within social distancing guidelines.

Calls for food provision from the Covid-19 and LWSS helplines are directed to this warehouse for food distribution across the city. On 21st April alone, 1,111 food parcels were distributed from the warehouse, including 558 ambient food parcels created, 338 of which were urgent direct deliveries and 201 packed lunches for the homeless.

The Council is also working with schools, its catering division and other partners to ensure that vulnerable children and their families continue to receive the necessary support, which includes access to food/free school meals.

Latest data reveals 8000 grab bags and 3000 hampers are being delivered weekly. Hot food provision has also started in 6-8 schools which have high numbers of children (for both vulnerable and key workers) on site.

Nationally, the DfE has introduced a supermarket voucher scheme for schools to provide to families entitled to free school meals. However feedback suggests the voucher scheme is posing significant issues due to the website crashing when schools are trying to redeem vouchers.

Shielded Customers

Leeds is anticipating 22,500 people will form part of the Shielded cohort, according to locally held data on Leeds. Currently 18,000 Leeds residents have been nationally identified and received a letter from MHCLG, of which 10,500 Leeds residents have registered and almost 3,500 have stated they will require help to access food, some of which are receiving a food box from central government.

The Council is working with supermarkets to offer priority services to this cohort as well as promoting the local support offer. Latest data from the Contact Centre has revealed that between Monday 20/4 to Thursday 23/04, 643 customers were in the shielded cohort. Of those 350 have required a food parcel.

LCC Spending on food

The Council has established an emergency food provision system to ensure the most vulnerable residents are able to access and purchase food during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following the Chancellor's Budget announcement on 11 March, local authorities have been allocated £1.6bn in additional funding to manage pressures relating to Covid-19. From this central fund, £21.9m was allocated to Leeds City Council to address pressures faced across all service areas in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of this pot £20,000 per week is being spent on emergency food provision across the city. The funding is used to top up donated food from food providers such as FareShare with essential food.

It is estimated the Council's overall spend on food to date is over £136,387. This is estimated from food purchased by Leeds City Council and value of food donated for the Council to distribute.

Food Purchased to date (over 4 weeks) £66,000

Donated from FareShare and ReThink: £70,387

Food Purchased:

- BID Wholesaler £60,000
- Costco £6,000

Food Donations and Value

FareShare, for the period 16th March to 22nd April:

Total food amount of food from FareShare coming into Leeds (to Council and third sector Organisations) was 61.52tonnes with a retail value of £97,592. Of this figure 33.38 tonnes has been distributed from the new Leeds Warehouse with a retail value of £52,387. A further 12 tonnes of food has also been distributed across Leeds with a retail value of £18,000 from ReThink Food.

Other donations received, to support the distribution of food includes

- Allied Glass - £5,000
- Clippers have donated an articulated refrigerated lorry,
- Morrisons have donated food value with an approximate value of £8-10,000.
- Morrisons have also donated trolleys, tens of thousands of bags, and equipment for packing stations.
- Leeds United are supporting with contacts/promotional campaign
- Leeds Rhinos are also supporting the promotional campaign,
- Innocent Smoothies are providing regular donations, in the thousands.
- New offers coming in from Britvic, Hayne Daniels, Walker Morris (law firm), EY LLP and Greencore.

Please note, this does not reflect the total amount of donations received as more donations are coming from many areas and feeding into different parts of the Council.

Supermarket Vouchers

To date, £62,850 has been spent on supermarket vouchers to allow volunteers to carry out shopping, within social distancing measures. The voucher scheme works in two ways:

- Free Vouchers allow volunteers to carry out shopping on behalf of the customer, and are available to customers in financial hardship.
- Paid Vouchers allow volunteers to carry out shopping on behalf of the customer and the customer will then be invoiced by the council, and are available to customers who can afford to pay, but unable to leave their homes due to social distancing.

The Council has distributed 1,314 of the free vouchers, with an estimated value of £32,850.

The Council has also allocated £30,000 on the provision of e-vouchers for residents who will be able to pay for their shopping. This scheme will begin on 28/04/2020.