**Housing Questions raised by Daphne Hall via DWP National Partnership Team, 11th September 2015.**

**Responses from the Department for Work and Pensions – Universal Credit Programme.**

**October 2015**

Q1. Notifications to social landlords that tenant is on UC - this is not happening routinely - the social landlord giving the workshop said that of 31 tenants on UC, they had only received notifications in respect of 9 - this experience was confirmed by others at the workshop. How does this system work and are there any improvements that could be made to make it more reliable?

1. Social landlords should receive notifications just as Local Authorities do. However the UC Programme is aware there may be some compliance issues with what is currently a manual process. On completion of the claim a non repudiation form should be completed and then issued to the service centre to be actioned. We have recently introduced compliance checks to ensure the correct process is being followed and we continue to monitor to see if there are any further improvements to be made.. The issue could also be that the evidence provided by the claimant may contain out of date details for example, old address for the Social Landlord. Therefore we are asking claimants to provide their most up to date rent agreement or statement so that we can check all address details.

Q2. APAs - a high number of tenants were requiring APAs - 16 of the 31 in this case - is that going to be manageable as numbers increase? Also, APAs requested because of vulnerability were being turned down sometimes. Is there a reason not to accept the social landlord's knowledge? What is the process to challenge? Sometimes there were delays getting APAs set up - any reason for that? And once set up there were occurrences of it only being paid once and then stopping - reason given was that is was a manual set-up - is this the norm, what can be done to avoid it?

1. We are confident that we will manage the numbers as UC roll out continues. We do take into consideration the social landlords’ knowledge when assessing vulnerability but there are a number of specific criteria to assess vulnerability, without more detailed information about specific claims, we would not be able to determine why the claimant was turned down.

We know that APA s have been taking longer to set up than we had hoped however we have introduced automation of APA’s which should see these delays being reduced.

With respect to APA’s stopping after a month, this is an unusual occurrence and not something we would expect to be the norm now that we have introduced automation to the process. There could be a number of reasons causing the APA to stop including a change in circumstances. Without knowing specific information/examples we cannot expand on this.

Q3. Payments - come on every day of the month and the reference numbers are not always easy to identify the tenant - pattern appears to be NI number less last letter followed by part or all of the landlord's reference number? How are reference numbers created? Is there any way of making it easier for landlords to tie up? Also if a tenant has an APA and an arrears payment they are not paid together - is there any reason for this? Can it be avoided?

1. All reference numbers are made up of 18 characters. We use 8 characters (which are the first 8 characters of the National Insurance Number), leaving the landlord with 10 characters to use. We have investigated your query further and we believe this was a problem pre-automation. We asked the NHF for some examples of the letters containing the mixed up reference numbers to check this and they were all pre-automation cases. We have asked that if there are any still coming through post-automation that they bring these to the next NHF meeting so that we can look again into the issue. The Service Centre checked a number of cases that had been submitted, these were in the majority pre-automation cases and prior to the communication of the correct format as described above. We have received no further examples following the NHF meeting on 18 September.

In response to the question re APA and arrears payment paid separately, the APA is issued automatically in line with the claimants Assessment Period end date, however the arrears are paid 4 weekly as a 3rd party deduction and not paid directly by the Service Centre. This is the same process as in Legacy Benefits.

Q4. 3rd party deductions - if a claimant has 3rd party deductions and an APA and is then sanctioned (using up all but the housing costs element of the award) then the third party deductions come out of the housing costs thus reducing the amount paid in the APA. What attempt is made to explain this to the tenant or the landlord?

A. In instances where we are unable to pay the full amount of the managed payment APA to the landlord, letters are issued to both the claimant and landlord informing them of the shortfall.

Q5. Lack of escalation numbers for UC - are there any? Can we have them? Staff at service centres vary enormously in their knowledge - some v helpful but some seem to have v little knowledge or understanding

1. Yes we have a specialised expert team set up to deal with housing queries. If you contact the service centre but not the housing team specifically, the agent will not have the same level of expertise as the housing specialists. The telephony agent cannot redirect the Landlord to the Housing team by phone. They can however request that a member of the Housing team ring the Landlord back if they are not able to answer the query. The SC Telephony route should always be the first method of contact. The Housing Service Line is for Escalations only and is not for general enquiries. The number is 0345 266 0041

Q6. Award letters to claimants talk about 'housing costs' not 'rent' - means claimants don't always realise they are being paid money that is for their rent and should be paid to the landlord - can the letters be made clearer?

1. Housing costs are an element of UC. We use this generic term because in some instances the housing costs element will not cover the full amount of the claimants rent, also some claimants do not pay rent they have a mortgage so we would confuse those customers if we referred to rent payments. When claimants attend their first interview at the jobcentre they sign something called a Non repudiation form. This form details all of the elements that make up their UC payment. They are taken through the form and then asked to sign it to say they accept/understand the elements that form their UC payment.

To support the next stage of Universal Credit we are reviewing the orientation of customers throughout their journey with us, this includes messages and communications. The point you have raised about customers not understanding their UC payment includes Housing costs to pay their rent is something we are aware of and will be addressed through our customer orientation strategy.