

Wiltshire Council

Council

17 October 2017

Councillor Jon Hubbard, Melksham South Division

To Councillor Bridget Wayman, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Question (17-58)

I refer Cllr Wayman to the letter sent to her on 14 July 2017 by the four reuse charities in Wiltshire, a letter sent as a follow up to the one sent to Cllr Sturgis on 21 March 2017.

May I ask:

- 1) Why, as at the time of writing this question, has no substantive reply been received by the authors of this letter;
- 2) Does the cabinet member recognise the considerable challenges and threat to the service provided by these charities as a result of the council's introduction of punitive charges for these charities carrying out their business;
- 3) Does the cabinet member recognise the considerable savings gained by Wiltshire Council as a direct result of the provision of the services by these charities and does she agree with me that exposing the council to potentially having to meet these additional costs is both inappropriate and unwise?

Response

The following was provided as a verbal response at the meeting.

- 1) A substantive reply has now been sent to the authors of the letter. I have apologised for the delay but am aware that officers have had further discussions with representatives of some of the charities concerned in the interim.
- 2) The charges which the council has introduced are not punitive but seek to enable the council to recover its reasonable costs on behalf of council tax payers. The council is under no obligation to provide free waste disposal services for the charities. To reduce the costs they incur, the charities could apply their donation policies which state that they will collect items that would be suited to the charities, are serviceable and in good condition. They should collect items which could be reused or refurbished and not collect waste for disposal.
- 3) The council values the work that the charities do and the support they provide to residents. The way for the charities to avoid incurring costs of disposal is to ensure that they do not collect waste but only items which have a value.

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Councillor Alan Hill, Calne South and Cherhill Division

**To Councillor Philip Whitehead, Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement,
ICT and Operational Assets**

Question (17-59)

Please would the Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement, ICT and Operational Assets update me on the current Wiltshire Council position with regard to the roll-out of Universal Credit in Wiltshire?

Response

A verbal response was provided as follows.

Universal Credit (UC) is very complicated and because of this at the end of this response there is notice of forthcoming briefings that will be arranged to go through the implications of UC in more detail.

UC will not apply to everyone. It currently does not apply to over 65s and parents with three or more children. For this to change new regulations would need to be passed.

Universal Credit rolls several previous benefit payments (Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credits, Job Seekers Allowance, ESA, Working Tax Credits and Income Support) in to one assessment which is capped at an annual level. As such UC does not cover Council Tax.

Payment of UC in normal circumstances is paid monthly and direct to the claimant.

The first tranche of Universal Credit was implemented in Wiltshire in March 2015 for single claimants without children and with no identified support needs. (this was known as Live Service).

Wiltshire is fairly early in rolling out Full Service: May 2017 in Chippenham Job Centre Plus; June 2017 in Salisbury Job Centre Plus; July 2017 in Devizes and Trowbridge Job Centre Plus. However, please note that the Job Centre Plus (JCP) geographic areas differ from Wiltshire areas. As such there are 12 JCPs affecting Wiltshire and because some of these are outside Wiltshire they will roll out to a different timescale. For example, Andover which covers Tidworth, will not roll out full service until April 2018.

As Full Service is rolled out, anyone living in a Full Service area who makes a new claim or who is receiving existing benefits or tax credits and has a change in circumstances will be directed to claim Universal Credit. A change can also mean a movement in post code, for example Someone moving from Tidworth to Trowbridge would have been on housing benefit in Tidworth will move to UC by the fact that Trowbridge is now a Full Service Area. Another example would be a single mother receiving benefit in Trowbridge who has a second child will be judged to have changed circumstances and will thus again move from Housing Benefit to UC on the birth.

Full Service requires users to make a claim online, notify changes of circumstances, and receive notifications, all online. This makes digital the primary channel to interact with DWP and is a significant difference to how claimants have worked with the Council. We are supporting this significant change with support for people in our Libraries, through the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and other partners to remove the fear and help people understand the online processes.

DWP figures at August 2017 show 592,256 people on UC in Great Britain. In Wiltshire, we had 1,855 households on UC relating to 3,075 people, of which 1,001 were aged 18 to 25 years old.

When someone transfers from Housing Benefit (HB) to UC their HB claim is automatically closed. Since Universal Credit commenced in March 2015 (Live Service) 853 of Wiltshire's housing benefit claims have been closed; however 559 of these have been closed since May 2017, Full Service roll out. New claimants go straight on to UC and there is no HB closure.

However, there are still currently 22,350 households in Wiltshire receiving housing benefit. (Just over 8,000 of those being over 65 and thus will not come on to UC.)

When claimants go onto UC from Housing Benefits the Council will pay benefits until we are told to stop by DWP. It could be around 3 weeks until an existing claimant receives a payment from DWP, if the individual is a new claimant then they will go through a circa 6-week process before a payment is made.

However, in both cases DWP will agree to an advance payment based on initial assessments, which should alleviate some of the problems caused by the delay. As such it should be exceptional cases only where a claimant is not receiving payment but there is an inherent risk in advance payments in that any overpayment made will be recovered over the following months which may cause future hardship.

Wiltshire Council is working proactively with DWP to ensure this does not occur and looking at its own emergency payments and support with partners to protect housing. We are also working within the Council to ensure that we have a joined-up approach to plan for children in care and their families. In addition, we are working with the various Housing Associations and others through Action for Wiltshire.

This change is the first in decades and as such there will be a process during which we will build up experience and learning and UC us reaches a wider group of applicants. We are keen to ensure we focus on cultural shifts as well as processes.

In respect of risk for the council rather than the residents, Wiltshire Council has on average 27,000 Council Tax Benefit or Reduction claimants, many of whom are on Housing Benefit and who will move or have moved to UC. We rely on the DWP to inform us of the level of income a claimant gets from UC and there is a risk that delays in the process of informing us may lead to overpayments or debt. We will continue to monitor this risk to the Council and whilst the numbers on UC so far are small in relativity to the overall population we are working closely with DWP to improve this process and work with claimants around recovery.

There are many more aspects to UC and a single response at Full Council will not provide a councillor with enough information to support their residents. Consequently, we will run a number of sessions on UC for Councillors that will to go into more detail. All Councillors are encouraged to attend and further details on the dates and locations will be issued shortly.

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17 October 2017

From Councillor Jon Hubbard, Melksham South Division

To Councillor Bridget Wayman, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Question (17-60)

I refer the cabinet member to the email sent to her by myself on 18th July, to which I have received no reply, and the subsequent email sent on 30th July where I received a response promising a full reply which I have never received.

For the cabinet member convenience I repeat the messages below:

Email sent 18th July 2017

Hi Bridget

I'm writing to you in my capacity as Chair of the Melksham Area Board asking if you could use your influence to try and move us on from an impasse that we seem to have with regard to the siting of the CCTV camera and associated equipment in the Market Place.

I have been contacted by xxxxxxxx leads our Community Safety Partnership team in the town, and who volunteers countless hours of his own time to run the CCTV scheme in the town.

It seems that there has been a communication breakdown between his group and xxxxxxxx regarding the siting of the camera and the associated equipment. I am not going to pretend to understand the detail of the problem and have come into the situation quite late on so cannot comment on who is responsible for the issue, although I do have to say that having read them I do not consider xxxxxxx's emails to xxxxxxxxxxxx to have been overly helpful or mindful of the fact that xxxxxxxxxxxx is a volunteer who is spending his own money and time on supporting this project.

I had asked xxxxxxxxxxxx, to arrange a meeting with both xxxxxxxx and xxxxxxxx present so that we could find a solution to the problem that everyone was happy with and understood, and had said that if the solution was that I needed to go cap-in-hand to the Town Council to ask them to support the cost of additional equipment then I would do so.

However, today xxxxxxxx has contacted me to say that xxxxxxxx has refused to attend the requested meeting.

Frankly I find it astonishing that a Wiltshire Council officer is refusing to attend a meeting with the Chair of an Area Board where they are trying to find a settlement to an issue in the community.

I would appreciate your urgent attention to this matter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Ref 17-60

Email sent 30th July 2017

Hi Bridget

I haven't seen a response to this email yet - could I please check that it did arrive with you?

Many thanks

Email received 31st July 2017

Dear Jon,

I did receive it and requested some information to try to resolve the issue – I will follow it up this morning.

Bridget.

Could the Cabinet Member please reply to the original email sent to her and provide some form of reply to the issued raised within it. Particularly:

- Why have no replies been given to the emails sent?
- How is it acceptable for a Wiltshire Council officer to refuse to meet with a local member to discuss an issue?
- What efforts have been made to resolve this issue, and if any efforts have been made, why has the member who raised it not been informed?

Response

The following was given as a verbal response.

Council Officers and Atkins representatives met with the CSP Chair on a number of occasions to agree the requirements for the CCTV during the early stages of the Melksham Market Place enhancement works. Following discussions it was agreed to install a duct from the Town Hall through the Market Place works to the relevant lighting column. A formal site meeting was undertaken between the CSP Chair and Atkins, as the council's representatives, at the end of June and a solution was agreed to accommodate the CCTV equipment by mounting it externally on the lighting column.

Subsequently it was requested other equipment to be installed, including an additional mast or cabinet. Due to the lateness of these further requests, and with no funding available for the work, it was not possible to agree to these requests. The request for a further meeting was noted at the time, but was considered unnecessary for the reasons given previously. The arrangements for the CCTV equipment had been previously agreed and there was no point in having a meeting to discuss further changes or additions when it was clear that these could not be funded or accommodated in the works programme.

I apologise if Mr Hubbard was not kept informed with regard to these additional requests.