



NOTES

**Welfare SDG
Virtual Meeting**

Date: Tuesday 26 January 2021

Time: 2pm-4pm

Organisation	Name	Job Title
1. Adra	Kate Ellen Sutton	Rent & Income Co-ordinator
2. Aelwyd HA	Gemma Watkins	Director of Housing & Communities
3. ateb Group	Lee Bridges	Money Solutions Team Leader
4. Barcud Cyf	Buddug Lewis	Head of Housing and Support
5. Barcud Cyf	Moira Hurley	Senior Cynnal Officer
6. Bron Afon Community Housing	Ryan Dorrian	Financial Inclusion Manager
7. Cadwyn HA	Agnieszka Rutkowska	Income and Customer Service Manager
8. Cardiff Community Housing Association	Lauren Howells	Support and Money Advice Co-ordinator
9. Cartrefi Conwy	Daniel Hall	Interim Head of Neighbourhoods
10. ClwydAlyn Housing Limited	Brendan McWhinnie	Income Team Leader
11. ClwydAlyn Housing Limited	Janice Peterson	Welfare Rights Officer
12. Coastal Housing Group	Paul Langley	Welfare Reform Manager
13. Community Housing Cymru	Laura Courtney	Policy & External Affairs Manager



14. Community Housing Cymru	Sarah Scotcher	Policy & External Affairs Project Officer
15. Family Housing Association (Wales) Ltd	Steve Evans	Head of Housing & Communities
16. Family Housing Association (Wales) Ltd	Lisa Rees	Area Housing Manager
17. First Choice HA	Maureen Lee	Operational Housing Manager
18. Grwp Cynefin	Elin Jones	Swyddog Lles - Welfare Officer
19. Linc-Cymru Housing Association	Carol Tough	Housing Manager
20. Melin Homes	Claire Pearce-Crawford	Income & Inclusion Manager
21. Merthyr Tydfil HA	Lisa May	Rents & Customer Services Manager
22. Monmouthshire Housing Association	Michele Morgan	Director of Housing & Communities
23. Newydd Group Limited	Rachel Rowberry	Financial Inclusion Officer
24. Newydd Group Limited	Scott Tandy	Community Regeneration Officer
25. Taff HA Ltd	Philip Hissey	Income Officer
26. Tai Calon	Owain Hopkins	Income Team Leader
27. Tai Tarian	Peter Southall	Financial inclusion officer
28. Trivallis	Richard Haddock	Money Advice Manager
29. United Welsh	Karen Thomas	Financial Inclusion Manager
30. Valleys to Coast Housing Ltd	Keryl Jones	Money Advice Team Leader



Apologies

ateb Group	David Tovey	Customer Services Manager
Cadwyn HA	Richard Vaughan	Head of Housing Services
Cardiff Community Housing Association	Lucy Mannings	Financial Inclusion Officer
Newydd Group Limited	Nicola Eynon	Housing Team Leader
Wales & West Housing	Christopher Walton	Housing Manager

Agenda

CHC and SDG updates

- CHC lobbying updates
- Report back from DWP Roundtable and Regional Networks
- Report back from Data Alignment Task and Finish Group

Break out group discussions: Strategic influencing on retaining the benefits uplift

- Why would retaining the UC uplift be beneficial for housing association tenants?
- What evidence do HAs have to support this – e.g. example case studies?

Update and Q&A: Welsh Government Welfare Policy (Paul Neave, Welsh Government) Select Committee report

- The Welsh Government Income Maximisation Plan, including the Single Advice Fund, a national benefits take up campaign and local work on entitlement to benefits operated in Wales; and
- Welsh Government DWP influencing, including on retaining the £20 uplift to UC.



Digital inclusion

- What are the major problems that currently prevent tenants who claim benefits from getting online?
- What examples of good practice in promoting digital inclusion for tenants should CHC be highlighting to government and other stakeholders?

Notes

1. CHC and SDG Updates

The current focus of the work of the 4 UK Housing Federations is in the following areas:

- Calling on the DWP to reinstate UK wide dialogue on housing specific issues Nat Fed have made approaches to senior DWP officials on our behalf with regards to the reinstatement of the Westminster based Strategic Social Landlords Forum.
- To press for progress on bulk uploads. DWP has confirmed this won't be possible for 2021 but that testing is still being done. The four housing federations will continue to push for updates on this.
- Reviewing and updating our campaign asks, and seeking opportunities to promote them. We will now include an ask around maintaining the £20 uplift for UC and WTC claimants

The Work and Pensions Select Committee recently published their report of their inquiry into the five week wait for UC to which CHC gave evidence. Although the government has not responded positively to this report, it provides sensible, evidence based calls for changes to Universal Credit. We feel these would be a useful basis for our influencing conversations moving forward.

Some of the key recommendations within this report are:

- Eliminate the five week wait for all claimants moving to Universal Credit through managed migration. Those claimants should continue to receive their existing benefits during their first monthly assessment period.
- Pay all first time claimants of Universal Credit a starter payment equivalent to three weeks of the Standard Allowance of Universal Credit.
- Advances should be renamed "new claim loans", so that it is clear to claimants that they will need to be repaid.
- The Department should commit to maintaining the increases in support that have been provided during the pandemic, including keeping LHA at the 30th percentile and maintaining the £20 a week increase in standard allowance for Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.



Link to the full report: [Select Committee Report](#)

Operational practice update

- We are in the process of setting up the next DWP roundtable for February or March. Please send any operational topics you would like us to raise with the DWP to Sarah-Scotcher@CHCymru.org.uk .
- Things are going well with the set-up of the regional welfare networks. Networks have been established in Cwm Taf, Hywel Dda and Cardiff & Vale. However, we do still need kick-start volunteers for Powys and Swansea Bay. Sarah will put details of the kick-start arrangements in the Chat.

NB: During the session, one attendees volunteered as a kick-start volunteer for Powys.

2. Break out group discussions: Strategic influencing on retaining the benefits uplift

Groups discussed the following questions to support our influencing:

- Why would retaining the UC uplift be beneficial for housing association tenants?
- What evidence do HAs have to support this – e.g. example case studies?

Group 1:

- £20 is keeping people above water – it isn't an addition that is putting people into wealth. This is needed.
- Large families affected by benefit cap would miss the uplift most.
- Add voice to JRF on child poverty. Not a HA agenda on its own – we could add voice to important issues.
- Buying locally means more expensive.
- We would be happy to gather evidence based on what would required and wouldn't have a shortage of tenants that would want to come forward. We could add weight and voice on this.

Group 2:

- The uplift is putting people in a better position than before, but not giving them a lot of money coming in
- Pandemic impact: Shopping locally, reliant on taxi and public transport, higher bills
- Debts have been accrued and could be defaulted without £20 uplift
- Huge need for broadband – people have tied themselves in to long contract
- No communication with claimants that the £20 uplift is only for the short period. Taking it away quickly would be hugely disruptive.
- Evidence:
 - Survey to send to tenants just asking what losing £20 per week would mean to them.
 - Foodbank referrals



Group 3

- People are just about managing on the uplift., but many are still being referred to food banks
- People are losing their jobs
- Contingency funds are all but gone.
- Leaving people on tenterhooks is really problematic
- This has just become the norm as part of their income

Group 4

- Impact on arrears – particularly for those working part time, who might have to work more to make up for the £20 uplift
- The muted lump sum might cause issues for people, what safeguards would be put in place for the most vulnerable.
- We felt it would be worth looking at a couple who had claimed with the £20 and those who had claimed without it.
- Report – average incomes, earned incomes and average benefit payment – rate is much lower than many countries. This payment is just helping to close that gap.

Attendees mentioned that it could be possible to collect case studies showing the impact before and after the £20 uplift.

3. Paul Neave, Welfare and Advice Policy, Welsh Government

1. New funding stream – single advice fund. WG funding in one pot, and asked for bids on collaborative and cross agency approaches to providing advice. Over 40 different providers are involved now – but those getting advice don't need to know where it comes from. Last year it helped people claim £34 million in benefits.

This also includes targeted campaigns for the groups who we know traditionally don't claim their welfare benefits – e.g. families with a disabled person or mental health problem in the household, people from BAME communities and people fleeing domestic violence. Providers have chosen on priority group to focus on. Project started end of Oct 2020, running into this year. It will create best practice guidance on support for the specific groups they are targeting, which Welsh Gov will share.

2. National take up campaign to be delivered during March, primarily on a digital platform but might also be doing some targeted leaflet drops and local paper adverts. Using Facebook, Twitter, Spotify. Trying to reach out to people who might need to engage with the benefit system for the very first time – e.g. when furlough ends. Will pause during the pre-election period, but then restart.

Attendees agreed to help to promote this campaign. Paul agreed to keep us informed.

3. Welsh Government are providing training for front line workers who are not benefit workers – those who are family support workers, people who work in food banks, etc. – to help signpost people to claiming benefits. This will run until the end of Sept – already fully booked until the end



of March. Currently online. Will collect evidence that this is a proactive way to get messages to households in Wales – what benefits are there. Welsh Government are currently running some bespoke training sessions for RSLs.

The Dangos website gives more details and allows people to register, individually, for sessions. The website is at www.dangos.wales and www.dangos.cymru.

4. The Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in October asking that the UK Government continue with the uplift beyond April 2021, and to extend this vital additional financial support to claimants of legacy benefits. A joint letter has also been sent to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions signed by Ministers from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The letter called upon the Secretary of State to have a more strategic approach to the take-up of welfare benefits, it also restated the ask for the £20pw uplift to be maintained.

4. Digital inclusion

CHC created a manifesto for the next government, based on input from our members and external stakeholders, has key commitments on digital inclusion.

One of our key asks for this manifesto is for the Welsh Government to take action to end digital exclusion. We've said that this should include upgrading requirements for all new homes to include digital connectivity as standard; and we have also asked for investment in digital infrastructure and skills support to ensure that all can access the internet as a key public service. One of our key offers in relation to this is to work with the sector to promote and support digital inclusion.

We know that there is a strong level of commitment across Welsh Government in pushing this forward at the moment – you may have seen the various blogs, etc. that they have put out. So - at CHC, we need to refresh our knowledge of the most significant drivers of digital exclusion, and of current good practice within HAs that we can seek to be highlighted.

Plenary discussion

Key barriers:

- This falls under three headings for me; Those who do not have a device; Those who have a device but are not fit for purpose and those who do not have internet
- People don't have a device; or the one they have is a hand me down. In some cases they don't know what the internet is. Often equipment isn't current enough to connect to the internet and/or use it in the way they need.
- Broadband needs to be not just accessible from a router, people use wifi hotspots, share with neighbours, etc.
- Tenants are struggling to access the internet with libraries, cafe's etc closed and job centres restricted access. Some tenants were walking around town, with closed shops just to try gain a wifi connection. Money is a barrier to access and sometimes lack of device.



- People cannot afford to purchase broadband, cannot afford to purchase equipment, those in rural areas cannot access or have very poor internet connections. We have loaned equipment from Digital Wales for some tenants but they need to be handed back in the future.
- Sometime as HAs we provide quantity rather than quality. When Amazon post £30 devices we buy loads but can't access Teams, Zoom, etc. For HAs it would be more cost effective to give people an iPad than to try to buy things on the cheap.
- Even when HAs have funding for a digital inclusion officer, this has not necessarily solved the issue. For example, some have struggled to keep tenants engaged with the officer in terms of training and support; some have had problems keeping up engagement after equipment has been provided; others found the digital inclusion officer spent all their time dealing with issues of fixing routers rather than support with gaining skills, etc..
- If CHC are getting involved in lobbying we need to be really clear what digital inclusion or exclusion is. There are so many complications and no simple solutions.
- Need to be quite precise about what we are getting involved with – is it skills, or is it about the fact that we can't afford it.
- The challenge with equipment loans is that when the equipment comes back, it is in good order, but we want to source a more permanent option. When we want to consult people we want to do it online – those who have taken up the loaned equipment have really valued it. It's a short term fix but the longer term issue remains.

Good practice:

- MHA in partnership with MIND have received ICF funding to assist tenants in our sheltered schemes get online and combat loneliness. The project is called "Virtual Lounges".
- Cartrefi Conwy LOAN IT scheme - The HA loans out devices for 3 months to tenants who have no previous experience of using the internet and train volunteers to help them get online and show them how to use their devices. At the end of the 3 months they give the tablet back, we wipe it clean and loan it to another tenant. The aim is to provide donated IT equipment from local businesses so that they are not left without access to the internet, or they decide themselves that they want to buy their own tablet etc. Uptake has been really good. We pay for sim and Gwynt y Mor windfarm provided funding to purchase the devices.
- Newydd - Vale Tablet Loan Scheme (device borrow scheme) Projects like this need to be led by LA with others feeding in due to costs and ease of access to devices.
- Affordable internet schemes: BT Basic, VOXI sim cards, Internet4Everyone
- Newydd - RCT Digital Fridays: RCT Digital Friday program provides a coordinated communications plan which all digital partners within the borough feed into. This provides a clear pathway of support to both referrers and service user.
- Family Housing - We have obtained funding for devices and PAYG wifi for these struggling with access or isolation.



- Clywd Alyn - We've run successful (pre-Covid) events with older people in care homes & extra care schemes, with a particularly good one in which schoolchildren helped older residents read kindles

Next meeting

Wednesday 31st March, 2-4pm - Register [here](#)