Public Libraries and Welfare Reform

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction

Summary

This paper explores the implications of the government's welfare reform programme for public libraries and the links to councils' wider plans for service transformation, superfast broadband rollout and the government's Assisted Digital Scheme which will help people to access 25 services the government intends to make digital by default, mainly through libraries and post offices. It follows-on from a roundtable convened by the Culture Minister and attended by LGA, Department for Work and Pensions, Cabinet Office and Society of Chief Librarians (SCL).

Recommendation

Members are invited to comment upon the key issues in section 12 which will provide a focus for LGA action in the autumn.

Action

To be taken forward by officers, as directed by Members.

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Public libraries and welfare reform

Background

1. The government's welfare reforms are extensive and far-reaching in both their scope and their ambition. The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) is a key element of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act which aims to make the benefits and tax credit system simpler. The vast majority of people affected will be expected to make and update claims online. UC will also be paid monthly in arrears direct to claimants.

2. UC is being rolled out on a phased basis between October 2013 and 2017, building upon the UC pathfinder that started in Tameside, Greater Manchester, in April 2013 and is testing UC with new single claimants. From October 2013, UC will roll out to six hub jobcentres in Hammersmith, Rugby, Inverness, Harrogate, Bath and Shotton. The focus for October is the "safe landing" of UC. As with the UC pathfinder it is expected that the claimant group will be very targeted and not include vulnerable claimants or claimants with more complex support needs.

3. From the outset the LGA and councils were clear that supporting UC claimants is inevitably part of councils' core mission to improve the lives of residents. Many of those who are affected by the changes will continue to look to councils and local voluntary organisations as their principal source of advice and support.

4. In February 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), LGA, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Welsh Local Government Association jointly published a draft local support services framework, which described the sort of support councils might need to provide or commission for UC claimants, and how these services might be managed. The framework was a very helpful starting point and we continue to work closely with DWP to develop a model that will enable the local commissioning of face-to-face support, including the role that public libraries and other council services will play in helping people to get online.

5. The LGA also worked with DWP to set up eight English pilots in autumn 2012 to test local government's role providing face-to-face support to UC claimants on issues such as digital skills, personal budgeting and housing advice.   The LGA recently published a summary of the learning from the pilots and they have been extended to the end of 2013. One of the key findings from the pilots has been the resource implications of supporting people who do not have internet access and / or do not have the digital skills to complete an online form and also the huge potential of public libraries and other council services to help people to develop digital skills.

The Online Challenge and the Public Library Offer

6. Almost 8 million adults in the UK do not have internet access and almost half of these are social housing tenants. The UC face-to-face pilots found that lack of digital skills and internet access was one of the main challenges with moving to an online benefits system – for example, Lewisham Council found that 52% of social housing tenants did not have internet access from home, while Birmingham City Council discovered that 50% of social housing tenants visiting their letting suite did not have an email address,

which is required for an online UC account.   Bath and North East Somerset Council found that while 80% of people were willing to make a claim online, 40% needed additional support. West Lindsey discovered that 42% of its claimants needed support, with 20% needing intensive one-to-one support.   Clearly the situation varies in different places and the reasons for requiring support are multiple and complex, including lack of confidence, lack of basic IT skills, security concerns and literacy or language challenges. These difficulties are compounded in rural parts of the country with limited or no broadband access – for example, 25% of households in North Dorset do not have internet access, meaning additional demand on public internet access points.

7.   Many of these people will turn to their local library for face-to-face help with completing and then updating online UC forms. The library network is well-placed to reach UC claimants, particularly those in work – there are 4,300 libraries, widely distributed across communities – compared to 800 Jobcentres concentrated in places with high unemployment.   In July, DWP announced that an extra 6,000 computers will be installed in Jobcentres across the country to help improve digital access.

8.   Public libraries are already at the forefront of transforming and modernising public services and for many years have been helping people to improve digital skills. Libraries are one of the few places where anyone can access the internet freely or at low-cost, often as part of a wider community hub that brings together other public services and information. They are also safe and trusted spaces where most people feel comfortable. Library staff also understand that this is about more than just supporting a transaction. There are 34,500 terminals in libraries with internet access, offering in excess of 66,000 hours of internet access. In the past year, more than a million people have been helped to go online for the first time by their local library.

9.   Government also envisages libraries as key to their Assisted Digital Contract, through which people will receive support (especially from libraries and post offices) to be able to access 25 government services online by default.

10.   The learning from the UC pilots, and work undertaken by SCL for their Public Library Universal Information Offer, clearly demonstrates the important role public libraries (and other council internet access points) and their staff play supporting people to develop digital skills and access the internet.

11.   Libraries and other council services are supporting claimants in lots of different ways – from providing IT training to develop digital skills, to making extra staff available and reducing or waiving fees to access the internet. For example, North Dorset has fine-tuned its benefit form so that it takes most people half an hour to complete, and has agreed with the County Council that libraries will extend free internet access to thirty minutes. Rushcliffe Borough Council has placed a number of internet terminals in their customer contact centres. West Lindsey Borough Council is overcoming the lack of broadband coverage by installing wifi access points in village halls and other community centres so that residents can bring their own devices and access the internet for free, with community digital champions providing additional help.

Key Issues

12.   Members are invited to comment upon the following key issues, which will provide a focus for the LGA's engagement with DWP during the autumn:

12.1. **Ensuring that the role of councils and the various internet access points they provide - including those in public libraries – in helping people to get online and access the internet is fully reflected in the UC delivery model** – enabling this will be over and above existing service provision and have resource implications for councils - especially in the short-term. Councils want libraries and other service points to play their part and the LGA will continue to make the case to government for this to be properly reflected in the funding arrangements for UC.   We also need to manage the risk that some parts of central government may seek to engage with libraries in isolation and miss the opportunity for seeing them as part of the councils' wide face-to-face customer service offer (not just on welfare reform).

12.2. **Joining-up the UC local support services framework with the Assisted Digital Strategy contract and superfast broadband rollout –** the model of local partnerships for UC local support services (which will bring together partners including the council, Jobcentre, Citizens' Advice Bureau, housing associations, voluntary sector organisations and so on) provides an ideal forum for understanding local digital needs arising from UC and commissioning locally appropriate digital support that reinforce a place's wider approach to service transformation. This also needs to take into account the local progress of the superfast broadband rollout.

12.3. **Continuing to test and share the learning from different approaches to helping people make online claims –** it is very good news that government has extended the UC pilots until the end of this year. The pilots will focus on testing the local support services framework and this will include further testing of helping people to make and update claims online. The LGA will continue to capture and share the learning across local government.

12.4. **Workforce development –** councils have been investing in developing the skills of frontline staff to help them better support citizens access services online, including those working in one-stop-shops and contact centres, as well as those working in specific service areas (such as housing offices or libraries). The role of the professional librarian is changing radically to also inform and empower people through digital. In some instances volunteers will also be delivering the front line library service. SCL has highlighted that welfare reform changes the role further with claimants turning to professional librarians and volunteers for help with completing online forms, requiring new knowledge and taking up time.

Conclusion and next steps

13.   Supporting the majority of people to access UC online will be a key factor in determining the successful rollout of this major programme. Councils' extensive experience of supporting people to get online, coupled with the more recent learning

from the UC pilots, has shown that we can expect significant numbers of people to require extra face-to-face support to access UC online. Councils are ready to play their full part in addressing the online challenge - through contact centres, libraries and other services – but in the context of budget pressures the resource implications of this must be recognised. Digital access in community based locations needs to be provided by trusted and knowledgeable, competent and confident staff.

14.   We want to work in partnership with government and SCL to ensure that the contribution of public libraries and other services to UC and wider efforts to make more government services available online is joined-up, resourced and innovation shared.

Financial Implications

15.   There are no financial implications for the LGA arising from this report.