

From the Chairman of the Association
Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell

Lord Freud
Minister for Welfare Reform
Department for Work & Pensions
4th Floor, Caxton House
Tothill Street
London, SW1H 9DA

08 April 2013

Dear Lord Freud,

Universal Credit: Local Support Services

As you know, we were delighted with the joint initiative the DWP and the local authority associations took to publish a draft Local Support Services Framework for Universal Credit in February. We saw that as opening a very important conversation about the future role of local government in helping you ensure that Universal Credit can be delivered with minimum risk.

We have now seen responses from many councils, held a thoughtful conference here at the LGA – at which your participation was hugely valued – and discussed the issues in the LGA's Finance Panel.

Our conclusion is that local government is up for this challenge. There is a very clear message that supporting UC clients is inevitably a part of local government's mission to improve the lives of local residents in locations and at a scale that makes sense to them. Councils are your natural partner in this regard. We provide the most effective route to market for the kind of personalised support that a significant proportion of UC claimants are going to need in the short-term and to get them reliably online in the long term.

It seems to us that the department would be missing a great opportunity if it did not take full advantage of what councils have to offer here, not just in terms of processing benefits but stretching the offer to encompass preventative actions like homelessness, employment & training that lie within our core competences.

At the same time, we need to get the deal right. There are elements of the published framework which many councils felt they needed more detail on. There are also elements which simply do not represent a bargain councils are willing to strike. And there are issues such as data sharing and the future role (and potential for transfer) of staff to resolve. Finally, you will recognise that the exact timetable and geography of transition remain to be settled, and councils would prefer there to be an element of negotiation with the department about how that is paced.

We want to work those questions through with you and your officials. The attached note sets out our proposed approach. There are many councils that want to work creatively with you to deliver what you are seeking to achieve.

As we understand it, there is now a window of opportunity to take this forward in the context of a wider programme reset. We cannot be more explicit that we see it as in both councils' interests and the department's to get this right and strike the right deal – visit any council customer service desk this week and look at the queues of people asking for advice on next week's welfare changes, and the force of this argument will be clear to you. Getting it right is achievable, and we look forward to a fruitful conversation over the next few weeks.

We probably ought to meet soon, and officials should get together at senior level in advance of that. We hope you will agree.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Merrick Cockell', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell
Chairman

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sharon Taylor', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Sharon Taylor
Chair, LGA Finance Panel