

Universal Credit Briefing

Introduction

As you may be aware, claiming Universal Credit can be more complex and challenging than other in-work benefits. This document is designed to give you an overview of the process for claiming Universal Credit, and the challenges presented to resettled refugees. Please also note that the process and policy on Universal Credit changes regularly. We will update our guidance as soon as we are aware of changes, but it's important for you to have a relationship directly with your Job Centre Plus who can provide further advice.

If you have particular difficulties, or you feel that you or the refugees you are supporting would benefit from one-to-one support, then we suggest you contact your local specialist advice agency, such as: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>.

The Government is gradually phasing out benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit and replacing them with Universal Credit. All Jobcentres in the UK are now taking claims for Universal Credit for people in certain kinds of circumstances.

However, at the time of writing, Jobcentres are only taking claims from refugees in areas known as "full service" Universal Credit areas. Full service Universal Credit is gradually being rolled out nationwide. You can check with your local Jobcentre where the family will be living to see if they are in a full service area or not, or search on the Citizens Advice Bureau website: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/universalcredit/before-you-apply/Check-if-youre-eligible-for-Universal-Credit/>

General advice

Universal Credit is designed to be accessed primarily online. Applicants can apply online and then maintain communication with the Jobcentre via an online account. This presents two possible problems for resettled refugees. Firstly, all the communication will be in English. Secondly, refugees may not have access to computers, tablets or smart phones which they can use to access the accounts online.

Internal DWP guidance states that those with no English or IT skills should have their journals "annotated" by the Jobcentre to say they require a "non-digital relationship", which means that the Work Coach should then meet with or phone them rather than doing everything online. Be prepared to advocate on this point if staff are unfamiliar with the process.

If the Work Coach suggests that the sponsor group should help the refugee to use the journal, and translate the messages between them, you should refer them to the guidance

above. The problem should sponsors take on this responsibility means you would have to available whenever required to translate and explain these messages (often they can require a response or action within a short timescale). This could be hugely time consuming. It can mean deadlines are missed, and can lead to the refugee (and the Work Coach) becoming dependent on the sponsor group for managing the Universal Credit account (without considering the time and cost of obtaining interpreters and/or volunteers).

Jobcentres may suggest that sponsors can access the journal with the sponsored refugees and help them to communicate with the Jobcentre. This contradicts the internal DWP guidance referred to above, and you should be prepared to advocate on behalf of the family on this point, and work with the Jobcentre and the refugee concerned to agree a workable solution.

In addition, Jobcentres may be unprepared for the practical difficulties facing resettled refugees, such as the fact that they do not have a bank account. They may also suggest that the refugees must complete a “eHRT” tool. This is a lengthy process which many non-UK citizens are required to complete to demonstrate they are “habitually resident” in the UK. For refugees, a “straightforward Habitual Residence Test decision” should be made and this is a much quicker process.

Wherever possible, we strongly advise you to develop a relationship with your local Jobcentre in advance of refugees arriving. You can then explore some of these issues and try to develop solutions together. Some Jobcentres have allocated specific Work Coaches for refugees who will meet with them regularly face to face to avoid problems accessing the journal.

All Jobcentres have access to telephone interpreters. However, their policy is to only use them for vulnerable refugees, so staff may be unfamiliar with the process or receiving such requests. Resettled refugees are considered vulnerable and have interpreters made available, but you may need to have prior conversations with the Jobcentre to confirm their understanding of the process.

Application process

The minimum period between applying for UC and receiving the first payment is five weeks. It is therefore important that applications are made as soon as possible. If there is a delay for some reason, for example due to urgent medical appointments, then you can ask for the claim to be backdated.

You should agree an appointment with your local Jobcentre to enable the refugee to complete their application. Every Jobcentre has computers available for use, and can provide staff known as Digital Work Coaches to support people accessing claims through them. It may be that one of these staff who assists the refugee to submit their claim, or

the Jobcentre may be able to assign the Work Coach that will handle the claim long-term who may meet you to submit the claim.

It is possible for all Jobcentre staff to access interpreters over the phone, however it can be difficult to arrange this for the first appointment so you may wish to bring an interpreter to ensure that the application is made, you should make it clear to the refugee and the Jobcentre that this is not an ongoing arrangement.

At the end of the online application process the applicant will be notified that they need to contact their local Jobcentre for an interview within seven days. If they fail to do so within this time they may need to start their claim again.

If you have already established a local process with the Jobcentre, then you may be able to arrange this interview directly through them.

Information required at application stage

For a full list of information required visit the website:

<https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/>

Below is information on some of the key issues and how they affect resettled refugees.

Identification

Refugees will need to bring the Entry Clearance Visa which they used to travel to the UK) and, if they have it, their BRP (Biometric Residence Permit). If they did not have their BRP at the initial interview, refugees need to make sure they present it to the JCP once they receive it.

Bank, building society or credit union account details

This is not required at the application stage but something will need to be entered in the online form to submit the application. It is possible to enter a dummy number e.g. account no: 00000000 sort code: 00-00-00. Work Coaches may need to use different possible combinations of numbers to produce an acceptable dummy bank account number. Don't forget the hyphens in the sort code.

Applicants will need a bank account before they can receive payments. Further information on this is contained below.

Email address

All applicants (including both parents for families or couples) will need an email address to apply for UC. It would be advisable to ask refugees about this before they apply, and you can then assist them to obtain an email address if necessary. Bear in mind many

refugees may struggle to write in English, so you may want to ensure it is written clearly, and that they can remember their password.

National Insurance number

The DWP will be informed of the family's arrival and provided with the NINO. They will have to access their internal systems to locate this, and may require prompting to do so.

Mobile phone

Refugees will be informed of their interview and appointment times by text message, so will require a mobile phone with UK sim card.

Information about housing and rent

You will need to ensure the refugee has a copy of their tenancy agreement when they apply. Additionally, if any of the following information does not appear on the tenancy agreement, they will need to know:

- Exact amount of the rent
- Exact amount of any service charge (if applicable)
- Frequency of the rent and service charge payments e.g. weekly
- Landlord's name
- Landlord's full address
- Landlord's e-mail address
- Landlord's contact phone number
- Number of bedrooms in the property

If your group are paying a housing 'top-up' for the property, this should be declared. It should not have an impact on benefit claims so long as it is not over £6,000 per year but should be made clear to the Jobcentre.

Initial appointment

This section should be read in conjunction with our document [Benefits Interview Guidance](#) for more detailed information.

The applicant will need to bring their original documents with them to present at the interview, including those specified above and on the DWP website.

At the interview they will meet their Work Coach, who will be the applicant's main point of contact. It is advisable that both refugees and sponsors make a note of the contact details for the Work Coach as these are likely to be useful if anything needs to be followed up. However, the identity of the Work Coach can change with staff turnover or cover during holiday periods.

The main purpose of the interview is to agree the claimant commitment, which sets out the steps that the applicant will take to seek work. The Work Coach should take into account that the applicants have recently arrived in the UK and may not speak English. So, for example, a commitment could be to study English.

Beware of Work Coaches asking applicants to make commitments they cannot meet, as this could lead to the claim being sanctioned if they do not fulfil them. If you think they are asking for something that is not achievable, you should explain why this is so.

For example, if they ask someone to prepare a CV when they are unable to write in English. Please see [Benefits Interview Guidance](#) for advice on how to explain this to the refugee.

In families with children, one parent will be named as the "lead carer". Depending on the age of the child, they could have different responsibilities to their partner in terms of meeting the terms of their claimant commitment. There is further guidance on this point on gov.uk in section 7 of this document:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-your-family-quickguide/universal-credit-further-information-for-families>

In two-parent families, there is likely to be a presumption that the mother will be the lead carer. However, you and the Work Coach should clearly explain the different responsibilities to the family and allow them to decide who takes this role. Some families may feel that the mother is in a better position to seek work.

Bank accounts

Bank accounts are essential for Universal Credit payments and applicants cannot receive payments until they have one and have passed the following onto the Job Centre:

- Name of bank or building society
- Sort code
- Account number
- Name on the bank account

At the application stage, dummy bank account details can be entered into the computer system to complete the refugee's claim. Once the bank account is opened and the above information has been passed to DWP, Work Coaches will replace the dummy account information with the real bank account details.

To open a bank account, refugees need to provide ID, confirmation of immigration status and proof of address at a minimum. For some banks, or for certain types of account, they may also need to provide proof of income.

Their BRP should be sufficient ID and confirmation of immigration status, and if any bank disputes this they should be challenged.

Universal Credit does not provide any information in writing as all communication is conducted through the journal. We suggest you contact local banks in advance of the arrival for advice about what documents they require to open an account, but common examples include utility bills, council tax bills and the Child Benefit award letter (this is the only additional benefit UC claimants can apply for).

There may also be an option to open a Post Office account, which the Work Coach can instigate. However, in our experience this is rarely used. We suggest you discuss this option with your local Jobcentre to decide whether it is appropriate.

In some areas, where the Local Authority already delivers resettlement, or where there are existing sponsor groups, they may already have developed solutions with local banks so do explore local contacts, or ask Reset for advice.

Payments

Payments for Universal Credit are usually monthly. There is a possibility that applicants may be able to request fortnightly payments instead if that will make it easier for them to budget. If a refugee would prefer this, please ask them to speak to their Work Coach.

Timescales

It will usually take around 5-6 weeks to receive the first payment, and clarification on this should be given at the first appointment.

Any problems can delay this date further, and if the applicant does not have a bank, building society, credit union or post office account then they cannot receive money even if the application is approved.

Advance payments

Once applicants have bank accounts set up they can apply for advance payments if they need to. These would be repaid through reductions in future payments for 12 months. Refugees considering this will need to be supported to think through the implications on their budget during this time.

Housing Benefit

Housing Benefit is one of the benefits that Universal Credit is replacing. Ordinarily, someone claiming Universal Credit who is entitled to help with paying rent would receive payments including a “housing element” and would be required to use this to make rent payments to their landlord. However, if people are considered “vulnerable”, they, or their landlord, can request payments for rent are made through an “Alternative Payment Arrangement” (APA). If they do this, it might be that the payment for the housing element will automatically be made by Universal Credit to the landlord without the applicant receiving this money or being required to make the payments by themselves.

We have heard from resettlement agencies that the use of APAs has been that they often create additional problems and stress. Refugees have found that they are not always straightforward to set up and can create confusion. For example, some refugees have worked with have experienced a delay in the APA being processed. This has meant that there is a period of time when the refugee will receive the housing element of UC despite requesting an APA, and then have to use this to pay the rent themselves. This can be quite confusing for refugees, and make it difficult for them to budget accordingly. The problem can be compounded if the benefit cap is applied during this period, as the amount the refugee receives can vary significantly from one month to the next.

If an APA is requested, it is important to check how much the refugee has received in their monthly payments and establish whether an APA has successfully paid the rent directly to the landlord. If not, they may need to make a payment directly to the landlord, so it is very important that they do not spend the money that would be needed for this. Refugees may need help from the sponsor group with this at least for the first few payments.

It is important to note that if the rent they are required to pay is greater in value than the amount they are eligible for from the housing element of Universal Credit, the shortfall will have to be paid separately. Sponsor groups will need to decide for themselves how these costs can be met. You can request a Discretionary Housing Payment from the Local Authority. However, as the name suggests these are awarded at the LA’s discretion so are not guaranteed, and are only granted for a time-limited period, often with conditions attached around seeking a long-term solution. If your group are paying a housing ‘top-

up' for the property, this should be declared. It should not have an impact on benefit claims so long as it is not over £6,000 per year but should be made clear to the Jobcentre.

Child Benefit

Refugees with children can claim Child Benefit in addition to Universal Credit and this needs to be applied for separately to UC. The Jobcentre should help you to complete the Child Benefit form, in accordance with the DWP fast-track process for resettled refugees. You may need to discuss this with them in advance to confirm they are aware of this.

Unlike Universal Credit, initial Child Benefit payments can be made via a Giro cheque and, while a bank account will be necessary later, there is no need for the refugee to have a bank account set up in order to receive the first payment.

In two-parent families, it may be worth the family considering whether the applicant who has been designated the lead carer for UC purposes to be the main applicant for Child Benefit. This will mean they will receive an income in their own right, sustain their own bank account and, in doing so, start to build up a credit history which they will find useful if they want to take out a loan, mortgage or mobile phone contract in the future.

Council Tax support

Refugees who claim Universal Credit will need to apply for a Council Tax deduction separate to their UC claim This is to help the refugees pay their Council Tax.

You need to find out from your local JCP or LA how to apply for Council Tax support. Council Tax support might not start until UC is fully processed and it is in payment.

Non-dependant charges

Unlike legacy benefits, if the family have adult dependents over 21 years old living with them, they will be hit by non-dependent charges for each dependent over 21 years old.

However, some exceptions might apply, so please check with the Jobcentre or benefit advice agencies.