

**To:** UC Programme Board Members      **From:** s40  
**Sponsor:** Neil Couling  
**Date:** 8 May 2019

**cc:** Lisa Hunter

## Tackling misconceptions and improving the reputation of Universal Credit

**Issue:**

**Recommendations/Decisions required:**

- For discussion.

**Timing:** For discussion at UC Programme Board on 8 May 2019.

### Introduction

1. The reputation of Universal Credit is influenced by a combination of:
  - public perceptions of the policy
  - personal experience of the service delivery, and
  - media and stakeholder commentary.
2. Unfortunately, Universal Credit (UC) has continued to attract stakeholder and media criticism and is all too often portrayed incorrectly in the media. This has led to a significant disparity between how Universal Credit is perceived externally, and the reality of the policy and the Department's role in delivering it.
3. This constant negative reporting of Universal Credit claimant experience is undermining the policy and communications tracking research demonstrates the detrimental effect on the perceptions of UC among our target audience. This is likely to affect claimants' motivation to engage with the opportunities that UC provides, and over time erode the behaviour change effects of the policy. If not addressed, the reputational damage being caused to UC will make it even more challenging to meet 'Move to UC' objectives of migrating legacy benefit claimants at scale.
4. The media context is also adversely affecting the Department's reputation in delivering UC, and it is demotivating for our operational colleagues who work hard to deliver excellent customer service for the majority of claimants. Tackling misinformation and unfair criticism is therefore an urgent priority for the Department.
5. Across the communications directorate we have put in place a number of activities which seek to begin repairing the reputation of Universal Credit and

demonstrate to colleagues that we value the great work that they do in jobcentres all across the country.

6. Launching on 22 May and running over nine weeks, you'll see a regular feature in The Metro newspaper called 'Universal Credit Uncovered'. This media partnership is part of our strategy to target the wider general public (in addition to claimant audiences), to tackle misinformation using a high profile national campaign presence. The series will be launched with a wrap-around page advertorial (front and back page) and a four-page feature which will myth-bust the common inaccuracies reported on UC, explain what UC is and how it works in reality and follow a day in the life of a Work Coach.
7. The approach is very different to anything we've done before. We are printing – and therefore acknowledging – the common 'myths' that are regularly reported on UC and then alongside these myths, the truth. The features won't look or feel like DWP or UC, you won't see our branding, and this is deliberate. We want to grab the readers' attention and make them wonder who has done this 'UC Uncovered' investigation.
8. The stories in the weekly features will put our work coaches at the forefront of the campaign to help reposition UC as a service delivered by people, who use the flexibility UC to design personalised support packages for customers. We will explain how the Department has listened and responded with changes to address issues in the system, and promote recent improvements such as the increase in work allowances.
9. We tested campaign tone and messages with Metro readers via an online survey as part of the development process. Survey results showed that respondents who were shown the campaign were more positive (*28% said it made them feel more positive towards UC*), and that understanding of key messages had increased significantly.
10. This Metro activity will provide a timely rebuttal to some of the negativity we see, and it is part of a more confident, front-footed effort to tackle misconceptions and improve the reputation of UC. In a very similar vein, you may have already seen the recent [Twitter video tackling UC myths](#) and this is part of the same proactive approach. We've had fantastic support from Operational colleagues in supporting our reputation communications – over 70 work coaches volunteered to support the Metro campaign alone.
11. Alongside this, the Minister for Employment has written to every MP in England, Scotland and Wales inviting them to visit their local jobcentres. Secretary of State has made a similar invitation to a wide range of journalists at regional and national publications, asking them to come and see for themselves the great work we do. We know that when people experience first-hand the work that goes on inside a jobcentre, they come away with much more positive outlook on what we do and this can lead to stories such as '[Behind the Scenes Look at Hull Jobcentre](#)' and '[The Truth about Universal Credit](#)'.

12. We have also just signed a contract with the BBC to allow them to do more extensive filming inside some of our jobcentres around the country, for a documentary series on BBC2. Focusing on three locations, they're looking to intelligently explore UC by spending time with our people who are instrumental in implementing it. Whilst the documentary will no doubt include negative case studies, we will be involved in the process from the outset and will work closely with the BBC to ensure a balanced and insightful piece of television.
13. The documentary gives us the chance to showcase how hard colleagues work across all levels work to support people onto UC. And we're delighted that colleagues are already getting on board with the process – understanding the bigger picture and helping us explore different possibilities for the programme.
14. We work collaboratively with UC Programme to proactively engage stakeholders, building trust by sharing information about changes early, and co-creating tailored communications products. The Programme's more transparent approach to engaging stakeholders from the start of the design of 'Move to UC' is paying real dividends in repairing the Department's reputation.
15. At the same time, we are working closely with UC Programme colleagues to develop a new creative proposition and messaging for the next phase of our national advertising campaign that will also be a key factor in successfully repositioning UC. The high profile campaign will focus on 'humanising' Universal Credit, targeting legacy benefit claimants and the general public to challenge their perceptions head on.
16. We have also put together specific communications plans to support Jobcentre in Harrogate as they plan the move to UC pilot and seek to engage local partners as part of the 'Who knows me' strategy.
17. Equally important to tackling external negativity, is addressing the demotivating effect it can have on our operational colleagues. We have therefore introduced a monthly summary of UC reputational communications for Area Directors to cascade which demonstrates how the Department is getting on the front foot in tackling myths and standing up for our operational colleagues (see annex 1). We also continue to use our internal channels to showcase the brilliant work that Jobcentre colleagues do to help customers, in particular the extensive range of specialist support that we provide to change people's lives for the better.

## Summary

18. Addressing the reputation of Universal Credit will take time and our front-footed approach is not without risk. We also cannot expect communications alone to turn around public opinion.
19. We will continue to build our strategy based on insight and evidence and we will test effectiveness by measuring in real-time and through a dashboard of outcome measures. We are working with the Programme to redesign our

metrics dashboard as part of a comprehensive evaluation framework to ensure we can monitor progress in repairing UC reputation.

20. Over the coming months we intend to build our evidence base and bring in a creative agency to support in the strategic development of our communications approach.

**Decision / Recommendation**

- For discussion