

Awareness and support set to help Eden residents with Welfare Reform

The next swathe of changes to the Welfare Reform system started rolling out six weeks ago and already they are causing concern and anxiety for some people. The new 'Universal Credit' brings together six benefits and tax credits and replaces them with a single monthly payment, paid directly to the customer who now becomes responsible for paying their own rent. Anticipating issues and questions from Eden residents, Eden Housing Association has developed a series of training and support events called 'Benefit Matters'.

Working in conjunction with the Cumbria Law Centre, the aim of the sessions in Shap, Kirkby Stephen and Alston, is to help bring clarity on what the changes mean to residents. The new system focuses on on-line applications, so the training events will also include IT support from Eden Rural Foyer. Residents are encouraged to bring along laptops and tablets, though equipment will be available on the day. Those with no computer will also be given details of how to access computers and the internet locally.

Carolyn Greenhalgh, Assistant Director Housing and Support at Eden Housing Association said "The first stage of the Universal Credit roll out focused on single people, that has now been extended to families so we have seen a significant increase in claimants amongst our tenants. We have seen very few claims that have been straightforward and have had lots of questions and queries.

"When we set out our 2015 training programme we knew it would be important to include 'Benefit Matters'. It's now clear that this is a key concern for residents, we've been able to use early claim problems to anticipate what people will ask and what they need to know."

"Since April 2014, we've been fortunate to work with Cumbria Law Centre; they are an independent charity offering specialist level legal advice and casework in housing, debt, welfare benefits and employment matters. To date they have been able to help over 200 residents; more than 80% of them have been welfare benefit related cases so we felt it was vital that we included them as part of the 'Benefit Matters' support sessions. I am sure residents will find their help very beneficial."

Pete Moran, Head of the Cumbria Law Centre said "Universal Credit is an apparent simplification of the system. However, below the surface, the administration of this project is immensely complicated and prone to errors. Our role is, in part, to protect individuals from the very serious effects of such errors, which can result in sudden loss of income or arrears in rent or council tax."

It is no wonder people are confused about what is happening. Not all benefits and credits are included. Universal Credit brings together six benefits and tax credits and replaces them with a single monthly payment. The six combined elements are income based Jobseekers Allowance, Income related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.

Benefits not included in the Universal Credit payments will continue to be paid as usual – these include Child benefit, Carers Allowance, Personal Independent PAYMENT, Council Tax support and so on.

The 10am – 3pm drop in training sessions take place at Wasdale Supported Housing Unit, Shap on Tuesday 2nd June, Mill Gardens in Kirkby Stephen on Tue 9th June and at the Alston Partnership Shop, Alston on Tuesday 30th June.

For more information about the 'Benefit Matters' sessions, contact Jenny Webb, Eden Housing Association's Community Development Officer on 01768 861400 or email jenny.webb@edenha.org.uk

Pictures: Carolyn Greenhalgh EHA Assistant Director Housing and Support with Pete Moran from the Cumbria Law Centre and Jenny Webb EHA Community Development Officer