



Managing the transition to Universal Credit at Lambeth Council



Flexible resources from Civica OnDemand support the council during the transition period from housing benefit to Universal Credit.

The challenge: recruiting housing benefit officers

As in many other parts of the country, Universal Credit is being rolled out across the London Borough of Lambeth, to replace housing and other benefits. But it's a fairly gradual transition, so the council needs to maintain its ability to process housing benefit cases while supporting the introduction of Universal Credit.

Lambeth has a permanent team of around 50 housing benefit officers, but was struggling to fill vacancies. With few experienced housing benefit officers available, the council considered recruiting and training new officers itself.

"We decided against it in the end, as it would have meant a big investment in time and effort for a role that won't exist once Universal Credit is fully implemented," says Miranda Feasey, Head of Assessments and Customer Centre at the council. "It would have been unfair to recruit people, experienced or otherwise, only to make them redundant in a year or two."

"I continue to be impressed with the quality of the work, the responsiveness and the can-do attitude, as well as the fair pricing for the support Lambeth receives from Civica OnDemand."

Tim Hillman-Brown,
Head of Benefits and Customer Centres, Lambeth Council

Outcomes

- ▶ **Backlog of 2,600 housing benefit cases cleared in 6 months**
- ▶ **Close to 100% processing accuracy**
- ▶ **Flexible resources that scale in line with fluctuating demand, avoiding the need for Lambeth to invest in recruitment and training**
- ▶ **Decades of housing benefit expertise and experience to call on**
- ▶ **Rapid familiarisation with Universal Credit processing.**

2,600

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Decades

of housing benefit expertise and experience



Having cleared a backlog of 2,600 housing benefit cases in six months, Civica OnDemand officers are now supporting Lambeth Council's transition from housing benefit to Universal Credit.

Efficiency, quality, accuracy

To plug the gaps, the council considered bringing in agency staff. "Using agency assessors can be expensive and is really only a short-term solution," says Tim Hillman-Brown, Lambeth Council's Head of Benefits and Customer Centres. "Given the uncertainty around the Universal Credit switchover timetable, we wanted to take a more strategic approach."

Lambeth found that Civica OnDemand offered the service it needed: fully trained housing benefit officers who can start work quickly, and stay as long as they're needed.

"We've used agency assessors for housing benefit before, but we've never come across a group of people as knowledgeable and experienced as the Civica OnDemand team," says Miranda. "Their work is efficient, high quality and close to 100% accurate every month."

The right resources at the right time

At first, Civica OnDemand staff took on a backlog of 2,600 housing benefit cases that had built up as vacancies left Lambeth's in-house team understaffed. Within six months, the backlog had been cleared, and Civica OnDemand switched to providing business-as-usual support.

"Given the way we're now resourcing the work, and assuming the workload doesn't change radically, it's unlikely a backlog will build back up," says Miranda. But even if the team's workload goes up significantly, or a number of housing benefit officers leave or need extended time away, Miranda knows she doesn't have to worry.

"The joy of the Civica OnDemand contract is its flexibility. So if three of my housing benefit officers go on three-months' sick leave tomorrow, I can quickly scale up Civica OnDemand resources to cover, then scale back down equally fast when my officers come back."

Miranda Feasey,
Head of Assessments and Customer Centre, Lambeth Council

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Better customer service

Today, the Civica OnDemand team handles an almost identical workload to Lambeth's in-house team, including Universal Credit claims as well as housing benefit cases.

"It was quick to get the Civica OnDemand team up to speed on Universal Credit," says Miranda. **"They're self-reliant, they check processes, they ask questions and make useful suggestions. They're a real asset to our team."**

The fact that Civica OnDemand officers work remotely makes no difference to Miranda, as she's used to managing a dispersed team. In fact, she considers geographical diversity a benefit. **"It adds an aspect of resilience,"** she explains. **"If there was a network failure in one area, officers based elsewhere could continue providing service to our customers."**

With no more backlog of cases, customers' claims and changes of circumstances are processed faster, and they receive their benefits sooner. Miranda points out this also means fewer calls from worried customers for Lambeth's contact centre to deal with.

A smooth switchover

Once Universal Credit is fully operational, councils like Lambeth expect to see a drop in workload. Until then, however, the workload is unlikely to go down — and could even increase. To help it manage the transition to Universal Credit as smoothly as possible, Lambeth has extended its Civica OnDemand contract to 2020.

"I continue to be impressed with the quality of the work, the responsiveness and the can-do attitude, as well as the fair pricing for the support Lambeth receives from Civica OnDemand," says Tim Hillman-Brown.