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DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

Written Ministerial Statement by Paul Givan MLA

Minister for Communities

INTRODUCTION OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

I wish to make a Statement to the Assembly in respect of the introduction of Universal Credit in Northern Ireland.

Universal Credit is a working age benefit for people aged 18 to 64 that will replace Jobseeker's Allowance (income based), Employment and Support Allowance (income related), Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit (rental). It will include support for the cost of housing, and when a claimant is in employment, it will also assist with childcare costs as well as providing financial support for disabled people, carers and people who are too ill to work.

The new service is designed to remove a number of administrative and financial barriers from the current welfare system and aims to ensure that it is easier for people to move into employment, whilst ensuring that people who cannot work can continue to receive the financial support they need.

Universal Credit represents the biggest change to the welfare system for working age people for over 70 years and with its focus on helping people participate more fully in the labour market, it has the potential to become a significant economic driver for Northern Ireland.

Universal Credit is being introduced across the United Kingdom on a phased basis and Northern Ireland timescales must align with Great Britain. I am pleased to announce that agreement has now been reached for the roll out plan for Universal Credit in Northern Ireland.

I would also like to acknowledge the sterling work of Executive colleagues in previously securing the Northern Ireland payment flexibilities, which will greatly assist Northern Ireland claimants.

Crucially, the Northern Ireland approach reflects some of the learning arising from implementation across the rest of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, the transition to Universal Credit will start with a number of smaller offices to ensure that the necessary customer experience is being delivered before increasing the scale of business. A series of breaks have been built into the plan in order to stabilise implementation in existing sites, and the transition schedule is spread across dates in the month in order to avoid repeated monthly peaks in activity.

I can announce that Universal Credit will be introduced for new claims, on a phased geographical basis from 25th September 2017 until September 2018. As it reaches the respective geographical areas, people living in those areas will be able to make a new claim for Universal Credit instead of having to submit multiple claims for the benefits that it is replacing.

The first office to deliver Universal Credit will be Limavady followed by Ballymoney, Magherafelt and Coleraine before Christmas 2017. A new Service Centre to support the new Universal Credit offices will open in Foyle in September 2017 and it is intended to establish a second Service Centre in Newry in early 2018. A full roll out schedule, showing office locations, has been placed in the Assembly Library.

I believe this roll out schedule is challenging but achievable and I will update the Assembly again when further details are finalised in relation to future phases of Universal Credit implementation. My Department continues to modernise how it delivers its services and the launch of the Universal Credit digital led service represents a major step forward in the delivery of the digital public services for Northern Ireland.

PAUL GIVAN MLA
Minister for Communities

UNIVERSAL CREDIT ROLL OUT SCHEDULE

Week Beg.	Front Office Name	No. live sites
25/09/2017	Limavady	1
13/11/2017	Ballymoney	2
11/12/2017	Magherafelt and Coleraine	4
15/01/2018	Strabane and Lisnagelvin	6
05/02/2018	Foyle and Armagh	8
19/02/2018	Omagh and Enniskillen	10
05/03/2018	Dungannon and Portadown	12
16/04/2018	Banbridge and Lurgan	14
30/04/2018	Kilkeel, Downpatrick and Newry	17
14/05/2018	Bangor, N'ards and Holywood Road	20
28/05/2018	Knockbreda, N'abbey and Shankill	23
11/06/2018	Corp St, Falls and A'town	26
25/06/2018	Shaftesbury Sq, Lisburn and Larne	29
02/07/2018	Carrick, Antrim and Ballymena	32
Jul – Sep 18	Cookstown (2), B'hinch and Newcastle*	36

*offices subject to the outcome of the public consultation exercise