



## **Our response to Universal Credit**

### **Robin Lawler, chief executive**

Because Universal Credit has been on the horizon for several years now, we'd done a lot of preparation to make sure it didn't take us by surprise. Deadlines were pushed back, changes made, but when the new system was finally introduced into Job Centres in our area in September last year, we were as ready as we could be.

All our frontline teams had been briefed – the rents team knew what to expect and crucially, so did neighbourhood officers who were signing tenants up at the letting visits.

Our approach was joined up – we've had a dedicated UC task force meeting regularly, with representatives from our rents teams, through to IT, communications and neighbourhoods.

Of course, there have still been things that we've needed to iron out. We know that around 100 of our tenants are claiming Universal Credit and there have been some teething problems. We've had to work with the Department of Work and Pensions to get alternative payment arrangements (APAS) for over half of those tenants.

So it's not been easy. On top of all this, we've also been dealing with the challenges of the bedroom tax – almost 3,000 tenants have been affected by the changes. We embarked on a major programme of door-knocking and offered support to all those tenants. That will be made harder by the expected reduction in funding for Discretionary Housing Payments.

Dealing with the fall-out from welfare reform is something that our teams are very experienced in, though, so we are hoping that rent collection does not suffer long-term even though we know there will be an impact. We've added extra resources too – like more money advisers and tenancy advisers to help keep tenants on track.

Our frontline teams at our social enterprise yes have also been instrumental in shaping Northwards response to welfare reform.

Since opening in August 2013, the dedicated team of staff and volunteers have helped to get more than 110 people into work, education or training.

The reason why our teams have been so good at keeping welfare reform at bay is their humanity. From our rents teams, right through to our digital champions, improving people's lives is central to what they do every day.