

**Bedfordshire Benefits Network**  
**Minutes of meeting**  
**10:00am, Wednesday 22 September 2022**  
**Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford**

**Present**

James Hurd - Bedford Borough Council (Chair)  
 Elliott Stephenson – (Facilitator and minutes), also representing Grand Union Housing Group  
 Benjamin Hughes – One Support  
 Chiara Mac Coll – Queen’s Park Community Organisation  
 Gill Eden – Money Advice at St. Andrews  
 Jenny Harris – Carer’s in Bedfordshire  
 Julie May – Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire  
 Karen Lister – Salvation Army Debt Advice  
 Lydia Field-Roberts – Stroke Association  
 Phillipa Ward – Carers in Bedfordshire  
 Samantha Conder – Macmillan Welfare Rights, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Terriane Wilcox – Bedford Citizens Advice  
 Wendy Jephcote – Autism Bedfordshire  
 Yasmina Mahmood – Hospital Social Work Team, Bedford Borough

**Apologies**

Melanie Gomez – Hightown Housing Association  
 Nichola Thompson – Hightown Housing Association  
 Briony White – Customer Finance, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Dace Blumberga – Customer Finance, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Julie Luckman – Revenues and Benefits, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Debbie Harris – Revenues and Benefits, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Katy Ruffles – Revenues and Benefits, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Bhavani Sarma – Macmillan Welfare Rights, Central Bedfordshire Council  
 Noor D’Agostino – Catalyst Housing Group  
 Maureen Sheridan – Sight Concern  
 Clare Anderson – Sight Concern  
 Paulette – Bedford Self-Help Group  
 Karen Banfield – Citizens Advice Leighton-Linslade  
 Karina Chamberlain – Macmillan Welfare Rights, Luton

<b>Item</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Welcome, Introduction and Apologies</b>	
	James Hurd, Chair, welcome everyone to the meeting. Elliott Stephenson was presented as new facilitator and minute taker for the meeting. Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken	
<b>2</b>	<b>Minutes of last meeting (16 March 2022)</b>	
	The minutes were agreed as correct with no amendments	

<b>3</b>	<b>Benefit changes since last meeting</b>	
	<p>Elliott Stephenson gave a presentation on changes which have been announced and/or taken place since the last meeting. Topics covered included Universal Credit, Immigration rule changes particularly relating to the Ukraine War, Personal Independence Payments and some other changes.</p> <p>Full slides will be shared with members with these minutes.</p> <p>It was commented that refugees from Ukraine are approaching 6 months having moved here which means they need to take some action to confirm they are still present. If they fail to do this it could affect their benefits as well as their immigration status. An example was given where it affected a Pension Credit claim. The Polish British Integration Centre was said to be in close contact with the Home Office and can support Ukrainians resolve this.</p> <p>Chiara Mac Coll asked whether DWP provide interpretation, particularly for their Bereavement phoneline. As there was no DWP representation at the meeting, agreed action to contact DWP to ask this.</p>	<b>ES</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Other benefit news and issues</b>	
	<p>Elliott's presentation continued into this agenda item. The government's various cost of living announcements were discussed, including the latest price cap on energy prices due to take effect in October 2022.</p> <p>It was commented regarding the new Warm Home Discount that energy suppliers will notify those customers who are entitled, as there is no application process this year and entitlement is based on DWP information regarding benefit entitlement and VOA data regarding how likely properties are to be expensive to heat.</p> <p>Full slides will be shared with members with these minutes.</p>	
<b>5</b>	<b>Updates from the local benefit offices</b>	
<b>5.1</b>	<p>There was no Jobcentre Plus update.</p> <p>Several DWP issues were discussed. Several members expressed concern regarding the Manton Lane Jobcentre Plus site in Bedford as being inaccessible to many vulnerable claimants, and some members gave feedback about what they felt were poor experiences for individual customers here.</p> <p>It was also raised that many DWP staff did not appear to know anything about the new SR1 form, which was introduced from April 2022 for doctors to confirm if a person is not expected to</p>	

<p><b>5.2</b></p>	<p>live for longer than 12 months due to a terminal illness. The SR1 form is now needed for ESA, Universal Credit and Pension Credit claims but DWP staff are still asking for DS1500 forms which are now only relevant to disability benefit claims. It was agreed to feed these concerns back to a DWP representative for comment.</p> <p>James Hurd gave an update for Bedford Borough Council.</p> <p>James explained their customer service office will remain appointment only. They are aware of some recurring phone line issues and those who can are encouraged to email <a href="mailto:benefitservice@bedford.gov.uk">benefitservice@bedford.gov.uk</a> instead.</p> <p>James confirmed there is a visiting service for vulnerable benefit claims – email the above address to arrange.</p> <p>James fed back that Bedford Borough Council are awarding Council Tax Support on information provided by Universal Credit even if claimants have not explicitly claimed, where this is possible (for example, no non-dependents).</p> <p>James explained that they had been cautious with Discretionary Housing Payment awards so far this year due to the budget being further reduced and in anticipation of a rise of demand this winter.</p> <p>James explained that Housing Benefit caseloads had remained steady despite continued migration to Universal Credit due to an increase in claims for housing costs in supported accommodation. There is a national review of this sector as concerns have been raised some unscrupulous landlords may be overstating the support provided in order to overcharge rent.</p> <p>James described how their Household Support Grant scheme has worked – applications were invited from residents with awards made by bank transfer once details were verified to limit potential for fraud and error.</p> <p>James also mentioned they have not quite finished paying out the £150 council tax rebate payments, and mentioned the discretionary scheme is still available for those who have moved into a band A-D property since April 2022.</p> <p>Further information can be found at <a href="https://www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/grants-and-funding/help-cost-living">https://www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/grants-and-funding/help-cost-living</a></p>	<p><b>ES</b></p>
<p><b>5.3</b></p>	<p>Elliott Stephenson relayed an update from Julie Luckman of Central Bedfordshire Council. A consultation is being held for a</p>	

	<p>revised Council Tax Support working-age scheme in 2023/24. Proposed changes are significant, moving to a banded entitlement scheme with the aim of reducing administrative burden on the council and greater certainty for claimants to know what council tax to pay. Some added proposals include abolishing the minimum 25% liability for all claimants and all non-dependent deductions.</p> <p>Julie has arranged a consultation meeting for Bedfordshire Benefit Network members on 19 October 2022 at 2pm to 3pm, where she will present the changes in full. Elliott asked members to confirm if they wished to be invited so he could pass these emails onto Julie to send invites to. Seven present at the meeting and one who gave apologies signed up.</p>	<p><b>ES</b></p>
<p><b>6</b></p>	<p><b>Terms of reference for Bedfordshire Benefits Network</b></p>	
	<p>Elliott Stephenson presented new terms of reference for the network, which had also been shared ahead of the meetings. Elliott explained that the original terms of reference were set around the time the meetings started 10 years ago, and he and Len Simkins (the former facilitator) revised these at the point of facilitation handover.</p> <p>The key points are that the Chair will be elected every 2 years; the terms of reference reviewed every 3 years; membership of the network is open to any advisor operating in Bedford Borough or Central Bedfordshire and surrounding areas; membership will be free but that can be reviewed; and meetings will be twice a year in Bedford.</p> <p>The terms of reference were approved unanimously.</p> <p>The terms of reference will be shared with members with these minutes.</p>	
<p><b>7</b></p>	<p><b>Information Exchange</b></p>	
	<p><b>Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>Yasmina explained she is no longer based in Bedford Hospital and works from home or from Borough Hall, conducting phone appointments as well as home visits, for all hospital patients and their contacts.</p> <p><b>Autism in Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Wendy confirmed she continues to provide benefit advice for those on the autistic spectrum.</p>	

**Macmillan Welfare Rights – Central Bedfordshire Council**

Sam stated she is not currently allowed to conduct home visits so the majority of her work is currently by telephone.

Elliott also shared from Bhavani who gave apologies for today that Macmillan are members of NAWRA (National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers) who offer free memberships to small advice charities. Macmillan would be willing to nominate local agencies to take advantage of this.

**Bedford Citizens Advice**

Terrienne stated the office in Harpur Centre is open for appointments between 9am-4pm. Staff there on Fridays but closed to public. Drop-ins can be hit and miss due to lack of staff – 1 welfare benefits advisor and 1 money advisor present per day. Much more footfall to office since the move to the Harpur Centre. Terrienne also confirmed Universal Credit Help to Claim enquiries are all dealt with by the national Citizens Advice service.

**Stroke Association**

Lydia stated they work remotely and conduct face to face visits with customers, however do not complete application forms. Lydia stated Bedford Hospital is currently 3 months behind on making referrals on discharge which means patients are waiting that long to be contacted for support.

**Queen's Park Community Organisation**

Chiara stated QPCO has attained charity status, and have secured 2 years funding from Harpur Trust for part time IO positions, plus paid manager. They have an informal interpretation service using volunteers. Work across Bedford, not just Queen's Park

**Money Advice at St. Andrew's**

Gill stated the service is struggling from both a lack of volunteers and clients, and there is due to be a review of whether the service continues.

**One Support**

Ben stated One Support are back in the community, focusing on tenancy support. There is a 2-3 week waiting list. Started drop-in twice a week Weds 1-2 and Thurs 12-2.

	<p>NB: Ben has since shared One Support's referral and other information to other attendees by email.</p> <p><b>Salvation Army Debt Advice</b></p> <p>Karen fed back that they are concerned about processing Debt Relief Orders with debt rising due to cost of living. They are offering a combination of telephone, office and home visits, and have a 2-3 week waiting list.</p> <p><b>Carers in Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Jenny explained Carers in Beds provide support to unpaid family carers. A new benefits advice service was launched in April with two staff. They have hubs at Bedford Hospital and Luton and Dunstable Hospital. They are also providing support to young carers (child carers) in Bedford Borough only.</p> <p><b>Mid Bedfordshire Citizens Advice</b></p> <p>Julie confirmed both Mid Beds offices (Amphill and Biggleswade) are open for pre-booked appointments. There are also drop-in sessions in Biggleswade once a week. Julie is conducting home visits for some clients.</p> <p><b>Grand Union Housing Group</b></p> <p>Elliott explained GUHG are continuing to offer benefits and debt advice by telephone and home visit for their tenants and shared owner customers. GUHG also have a Wellbeing &amp; Support service and employability advice.</p> <p><b>Sight Concern</b></p> <p>Elliott fed back on behalf of Clare from Sight Concern that three free workshops are being delivered by Mind BLMK on behalf of Sight Concern Bedfordshire. These workshops are not only available to people living with sight loss across Bedfordshire, but also to anyone that supports someone with sight loss whether it be professionally/friendship/family/carer capacity. Elliott stated that flyers for these would be sent out with the minutes, however unfortunately the events had taken place by the time minutes were completed.</p>	
<b>8</b>	<b>BAF Training</b>	
	<p>Elliott explained there is no firm news about a training plan at this stage. A training plan has been formulated and news on funding is currently awaited.</p>	

	Elliott invited anyone who might be interested in being a trainer to contact him as training relies on local experts to deliver. BAF are planning to hold a train the trainer course as part of the package so even those who have never trained before are encouraged to get in touch.	
<b>9</b>	<b>Any other business</b>	
	<p>Samantha Conder mentioned that CPAG has 25 bursary places for Universal Credit training courses each year until end of 2022 thanks to Comic Relief funding.</p> <p>The bursaries are available to small groups and organisations supporting disadvantaged communities across England (excluding London), Wales and Northern Ireland. Any queries should go to <a href="mailto:bursaries@cpag.org.uk">bursaries@cpag.org.uk</a></p>	
<b>10</b>	<b>Date of future meeting</b>	
	The date for the next meeting was set to Wednesday 15 March 2023 at 10am to 12pm. It is planned to be held at Bunyan Meeting subject to availability.	