

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

Minutes of meeting

10:00am, Wednesday 13 September 2023

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

- James Hurd - Bedford Borough Council (Chair)
- Elliott Stephenson – (Facilitator and minutes), also representing Grand Union Housing Group (GUHG)
- Clare Anderson – Sight Concern
- Gill Eden – Salvation Army Debt Advice Bedford
- Jemma McLean – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC)
- Jenny Pulling – Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
- Julie May – Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
- Karen Banfield – Leighton Linlade Citizens Advice
- Len Simkins – Advice Bedfordshire
- Lorena Cornwell – One Housing
- Lydia Field-Roberts – Stroke Association
- Renata Kania – bpha
- Ruby Malhotra – Titan PCN
- Samantha Conder – Macmillan Welfare Rights, Central Bedfordshire Council
- Samantha McAdam – Central Bedfordshire Council Housing Operations
- Steven Kunes – Hightown Housing Group
- Yasmina Mahmood – Bedford Borough Council, Hospital Social Work Team

Apologies

- Briony White – Central Bedfordshire Council Customer Finance
- Dawn Riley – DWP Jobcentre Plus
- Debbie Harris – Central Bedfordshire Council Revenues and Benefits
- Jade Gaynor – Bedford Borough Council
- Jenny Harris – Carer's in Bedfordshire
- Julia Bailey-Paul – Bedford Christians Against Poverty Debt Centre
- Julie Luckman – Central Bedfordshire Council Revenues and Benefits
- Karen Lister – Salvation Army Debt Advice Bedford
- Karina Chamberlain – Macmillan Welfare Rights
- Katy Ruffles – Central Bedfordshire Council Housing Operations
- Liz Webb – Central Bedfordshire Council Revenues and Benefits
- Neill Waring – YouTurn Futures
- Nichola Thompson – Hightown Housing Association
- Noor D'Agostino – Peabody Housing Trust
- Paulette Rennie – Bedford Self-Help Group
- Philippa Ward – Carers in Bedfordshire

Minutes

Item	Subject	Action
1	Welcome, Introduction and Apologies James Hurd, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Elliott Stephenson, Facilitator, noted there were a large number of apologies which would be communicated in the minutes.	

2 Minutes of last meeting (15 March 2023)

The minutes were agreed as correct with no amendments

3 Updates from the local benefit offices

3.1 DWP: DWP gave their apologies today due to a clashing all-staff meeting and they had nothing to feed back.

3.2 Bedford Borough Council (BBC):

James confirmed managed migration of Universal Credit will not be starting until next year in Bedford. He reported there would be no Tax Credit renewals next year due to managed migration. James is very concerned for self-employed claimants as the approaches between Tax Credits and Universal Credit vary widely. BBC have estimated about 1000 claimants will be affected next year. James added that DWP are not touching those on ESA-Income Related yet.

3.3 Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC):

Elliott explained that Julie Luckman gave her apologies for the meeting today and explained that due to a change in structure she would no longer be attending these meetings from Revenues and Benefits. Debbie Harris and Liz Webb are possible future attendees but also could not attend today.

Elliott fed back from Julie that “the new Banded CTS scheme has been well received. It’s busy – particularly with regard to DHPs: Out of a total budget of approximately £370k we have approximately £100k left. “

Discussion following these updates:

Jenny Pulling reported there was on case where the CBC CTS scheme transitional protection was not applied in one case in error, but they appealed this successfully. This affected a large family which is one of the few scenarios where claimants can be worse off on the new scheme.

James reflected that BBC operate their CTS with a restriction on claims from people living in large properties, and the scheme was not likely to change for 2024/25 at least.

James explained the BBC Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) budget was slightly underspent; James has been anticipating increases in claims due to skyrocketing rents in the private sector well above the Local Housing Allowance rates for Bedford. Lots of landlords are selling up reducing supply and therefore increasing rent prices. There are a large number of people in temporary accommodation in and near Bedford currently.

Karen Banfield asked whether councils can use other money to

top up DHP budgets. James said in theory they could but all council budgets are stretched.

James reflected that there has been a huge growth in supported/exempt accommodation Housing Benefit claims in Bedford – now around 1000 when it was 100 a few years ago. There has been a new act of parliament aimed at curtailing unscrupulous providers who are not really providing the support claimed; they are motivated to do this as it allows them to charge higher rents which are paid from public purse.

Lorena Cornwell from One Support said to James she had heard BBC weren't accepting any more homelessness applications because there is nowhere to house people. James stated BBC are using a lot of land to house homeless people, also using bpha properties which are hard to let and hotels including out of area; and other councils are using properties within Bedford Borough due to the same pressures. James stated there are affordable properties being built locally and nationally but it is not enough to meet demand.

Lorena was asked what One Support was doing to support people. Lorena explained it is very difficult due to limited options, families are moving away from Bedford to places like Nottingham and Northampton, meaning children displaced from schools. Lorena stated they are fighting a losing battle with the council as there are no larger properties. Lorena reflected that once people are in the private sector it is hard to get out of as they get a lower banding on the housing register.

James asked Elliott if he knew whether CBC are doing a Household Support Grant scheme. Elliott explained he knew CBC were operating this in conjunction with other local agencies including Citizens Advice and Preen, but GUHG decided to opt out due to having their own fund for their customers this year. Karen Banfield reflected that last year people would contact Citizens Advice just for vouchers without accessing advice so this year they are not helping anyone who is not engaging with them. James did not know what BBC's Household Support Grant was this year.

Samantha Conder asked James about the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), could this budget be spread among other council budgets. James explained that this is not a set budget, DFG is used if the applicant is eligible so it is not something which can be allocated elsewhere.

Len Simkins asked James about Local Housing Allowance. James stated these rates have been frozen since they were raised during covid times, which was the first time in many

years they had been increased, and James predicted these would not be raised again any time soon.

Renata Kania asked James where BBC operate rent controls. James stated there are no rent controls. Sometimes landlords raise rents because they have their own rising costs such as buy-to-let mortgages, but other times it is just because they can in line with the market.

Lorena talked about rogue landlords who do not want to maintain properties. Environmental Health have not been helpful and where can she take these issues? Julie May asked why they are not helping, as she had previously worked for them and they should be able to conduct enforcement on landlords. Lorena stated Environmental Health will sometimes ask for work to be done but it still isn't done, and also this can trigger landlords to harass tenants and Police aren't interested.

Lydia Field-Roberts reflected that there is no real escalation route for housing issues.

4 Benefit changes and news

Elliott gave a presentation on the changes to benefit rules and related news over the past 6 months. The presentation slides will be sent out with the minutes.

5 Information Exchange

BBC Hospital Social Work team: Yasmina explained she still mainly works from home, dealing with referrals directly from the social services hospital discharge team

Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire: Julie May stated it was her last day today and she is moving to a job in North Herts so would not be attending our meetings again. Her outreach role is being advertised as a joint post between Bedford and Mid Beds Citizens Advice offices.

One Support: Lorena gave their phone number of 01234 215040 for referrals, and stated she would send their referral form to Elliott to include in the papers for the meeting.

BRCC: Jemma explained she was representing BRCC's social prescribers, who signpost/refer people onto appropriate services.

Titan PCN: Ruby explained she represents a network of surgeries in south Central Bedfordshire, also referring patients on to sources of support.

Bpha: Renata reported there is no change in service, they are currently fully staffed and responding within 3 days. Bpha customers only.

Stroke Association: Lydia explained they give advice but have to refer to other agencies if clients need help with form filling.

Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade: Karen Banfield explained their advice is still mostly over the telephone, which is so successful they are getting out of area calls they are having to redirect. Appointments can be booked if needed.

Salvation Army Debt Advice Bedford: Gill stated she had recently moved to Salvation Army from Money Advice at St. Andrews who had closed down. They have capacity for cases currently and invite referrals. They refer complex benefits advice work to other agencies.

Macmillan Welfare Rights: Samantha Conder stated Macmillan are still really busy. They've just recruited for another full-time post which will cover Bedfordshire and Peterborough. They hold face to face appointments and hospital outreach. Sam asked if anyone could help her make links with GP surgeries in Biggleswade/Sandy area as they are struggling to do outreach there. Sam also explained about the Macmillan Grants scheme – awards are reducing from £350 to £300, and applicants must have less than £1,000 in savings to qualify, however applicants can apply again after 2 years instead of 6.

Sight Concern: Clare stated they cover the whole of Bedfordshire, will do PIP forms on home visits. She explained there was an event next week for blind/partially sighted people and their carers which she would send to Elliott to distribute with the papers [NB: Elliott sent this flyer in advance of the papers to ensure it arrived ahead of the event].

6 BAF Training

Len provided a report on this year's successful BAF Training programme. A copy of his written report is included with the minutes.

Len asked for suggestions for future training topics as BAF plan to organise another training programme for early 2024.

7 Date of future meeting

The date for the next meeting was confirmed to be: 13 March 2024. We agreed we would aim for it to be held at Bunyan Meeting again.