

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

Minutes of meeting

10:00am, Wednesday 15 March 2023

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

James Hurd - Bedford Borough Council (Chair)

Elliott Stephenson – (Facilitator and minutes), also representing Grand Union Housing Group

Chris McMahon – Independent Assessment Services (Speaker)

Andrea Tulloch – BRASS

Clare Anderson – Sight Concern

Dawn Riley – DWP Bedford Jobcentre Plus

Francesco Martorelli – DWP Bedford Jobcentre Plus

Helen Cole – Bedford Citizens Advice

Jenny Pulling – Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire

Julie May – Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire

Karen Banfield – Leighton Linslade Citizens Advice

Karen Lister – Salvation Army

Katy Ruffles – Central Bedfordshire Council Housing Operations

Len Simkins – Advice Bedfordshire

Lorena Martorelli – One Housing

Nathan Kirkwood – Bedford Citizens Advice

Philippa Ward – Carer's in Bedfordshire

Renata Kania – bpha

Samanatha Conder – Macmillan Welfare Rights, Central Bedfordshire Council

Sue Turner – Bedford Citizens Advice

Susan Halfpenny – Central Bedfordshire Council Housing Operations

Terrienne Wilcox – Bedford Citizens Advice

Wendy Jephcote – Autism Bedfordshire

Yasmina Mahmood – Bedford Borough Council, Hospital Social Work Team

Apologies

Anna-Louise Hilton – DWP Biggleswade Jobcentre Plus

Jenny Harris – Carer's in Bedfordshire

Julie Luckman – Central Bedfordshire Council

Karina Chamberlain – Macmillan Welfare Rights

Lydia Field-Roberts – Stroke Association

Nichola Thompson – Hightown Housing Association

Noor D'Agostino – Catalyst Housing Group

Minutes

Item	Subject	Action
1	Welcome, Introduction and Apologies James Hurd, Chair, welcome everyone to the meeting. Apologies for absence were noted.	

2 Minutes of last meeting (22 September 2022)

The minutes were agreed as correct with no amendments

3 Chris McMahon Atos PIP assessments

Chris introduced himself, worked for Atos (a.k.a. Independent Assessment Services (IAS) for nearly 7 years. IAS are an Independent Assessment Provider, supporting DWP with assessments to understand health and disability of claimants and how it impacts on their day to day life

He comes from clinical background, he was conducting PIP consultations, became clinical lead, now held role as Stakeholder Engagement Manager for 18 months. Chris confirmed he was happy for his contact details to be shared with stakeholders (chris.mcmahon@atos.net). He is willing to listen to feedback, important to listen, his job to capture the good, the bad and the ugly, helps their continuous improvement plan.

Chris gave a presentation; the slides will be emailed out with these minutes. Some other comments made:

NHS trusts – often won't respond to requests for evidence from IAS due to GDPR despite claimant giving permission via claim. This reduces amount of paper based reviews they can do, leading to more assessments. IAS working with Macmillan to resolve this for their client base. Recommendation is to notify NHS of request for evidence due to be made, or request copy of records and provide with claim.

GP evidence – claimants often get charged for this and it is not always very useful.

No hierarchy of evidence – old evidence can be useful if it remains clinically relevant.

DWP decision makers are deliberately told to keep within a word count which can result in important information being missed from their decision letters.

Comment about confusion between SR1 and DS1500s. DS1500s (statement by GP that patient is not expected to live for longer than 6 months) is used for disability benefits, SR1 (statement by GP that patient is not expected to live for longer than 12 months) is used for means-tested benefits. Sometimes claimants only have SR1s and not DS1500s and it means they cannot get a special rules claims resulting in them having to do PIP assessments. The government says they plan to change it so all benefits use SR1s soon.

Q&A session:

Q: Could IAS develop an extra consent form for claimants to sign to enable NHS trusts to share information?

A: Idea taken away

Q: What is the breakdown of types of assessments?

A: 65% telephone, 20% face to face, rest are either video or paper based.

Q: How long are assessments taking to complete?

A: Last data from October 2022 says 16 weeks, much improved on 12 months ago. There has been a 20% increase on claims for PIP to the DWP, which is 18000 extra per week. Reviews were paused first for 3 months then for 12 to allow backlog to be cleared, but they have been resumed again now.

Q: Sometimes claimants understate their limitations, can assessors dig deeper like Welfare Benefits Advisors would when completing forms?

A: If claimant says no problem then that will generally be taken as read.

Q: Do assessors refer to the PIP2 form during the assessment?

A: Yes, assessor will have read this before starting the assessment.

Q: What is the best way of asking for the assessment to be recorded?

A: Contact IAS customer line with at least 3 days notice. If its a phone assessment the HCP will generally ring a third number which is a deadline which records the call.

Q: Is there quality monitoring?

A: Yes, they have a service level agreement with the DWP for this. IAS have an internal audit team but DWP will also take a random selection of cases to audit.

The network took a break halfway through the meeting. After the break the chair decided to change the order of the agenda.

4 Updates from the local benefit offices

4.1 DWP: Dawn and Franc attended from Bedford Jobcentre Plus

Dawn reported that Bedford JCP have a Russian speaker

which has been helpful supporting Ukrainians. Philippa gave positive feedback to Dawn about staff at Bedford Jobcentre. Other members of the network asked questions:

Q: Can DWP provide some support to find work for non-UK nationals on health work visas with no recourse to public funds?

A: Agreed to set up a list of local providers who have permission from Home Office to recruit this group of people.

Q: Asked about the court case regarding EEA nationals with pre-settled status and eligibility for benefits.

A: DWP staff aware of case but it is still ongoing so no decision. There are people with claims on hold due to the outstanding case.

Q: What news is there about the UC Managed migration?

A: DWP might be bringing forward JSA migration alongside Tax Credits this year. Only 230 JSA claimants in Bedford now. Might move over by September/October but this is not an official claim yet.

Q: Are claimants with fit notes still be asked to look for work on UC and still subject to threats of sanction

A: UC claimants are not automatically put in a no-work group with a fit note, it is down to work coach discretion, but Dawn agreed to take away an individual case query.

Q: There was a problem with fit notes not prompting a WCA on a claim and then fit notes ran out so claimant was told they cannot have WCA.

A: The claim has to have a current fit note at the point of the WCA referral being made otherwise it will not proceed.

Q: Sometimes when requesting mandatory reconsiderations via the UC journal they aren't acknowledged, there is no decision meaning the claimant cannot proceed with appeal.

A: Advised to write a journal note about a payment to get it sent to a case manager as this can happen for claimants without work coaches due to having no work search requirements.

4.2 Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC):

Julie Luckman gave a written update which James read out.

CBC's new banded Council Tax Support scheme has been approved and will start from 1 April 2023.

Small changes in income will not result in a different award as long as it remains within same banding, which should mean fewer changes to process which will save a lot of money.

As a result, CBC have been able to remove the requirement to pay 25% as a minimum of council tax for most claimants, as well as removing all non-dependent deductions and some other smaller changes. One negative change is that there won't be extra awards for children after the first three on the claim; this only affects a small number of claims.

Those current claimants who would be worse off on the new scheme will be given transitional protection. According to the consultation on the new scheme, how this will work is they will still be assessed on the new scheme until they would be better off on the new scheme or their award ends – once either of those happen they cannot return to the old scheme.

4.3 Bedford Borough Council:

No change to Council Tax Scheme.

Household Support Funds continuing into 2023/24.

Discretionary Housing Payments have been overspent in 2022/23, and James anticipates issues in 2023/24 due to the fact that Local Housing Allowance rates have been frozen but rents are rising, meaning larger unaffordable shortfalls in rent.

Positive feedback was given about the Bedford Jobs Hub.

5 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.

6 BAF training

Len Simkins gave an update on training on behalf of Bedfordshire Advice Forum (BAF).

Len explained that BAF are currently applying for funding in order to be able to offer subsidised training, but even if that is not successful, BAF intend to run a program of benefits training on at least Introduction to Benefits, Universal Credit and Disability Benefits as topics during spring and summer 2023.

7 Information Exchange/any other business

The chair combined these two agenda items due to lack of time, and only a few members had some information to share:

Macmillan Welfare Rights – will shortly be recruiting two new advisors, one full time, one part-time for two days a week.

One Housing are planning a networking event; they are also merging with Riverside Housing, a name for the new organisation has not been decided yet.

Catalyst: Noor gave apologies, but Elliott reported that Catalyst are merging with Peabody, and Peabody will be the name used from April 2023.

Money Advice at St. Andrews: This was not mentioned during the meeting but is worth noting in the minutes of the unfortunate closure of the Money Advice at St. Andrews service in Bedford.

8 Date of future meeting

Dates for the next meeting were not set but the network agreed on the principles that they should continue to be on Wednesday mornings in Bedford, at Bunyan Meeting if available, and held face-to-face.

NB: Suggested dates are

13 September 2023

13 March 2024