

# BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

## MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

### Present

Elliott Stephenson	BAF / Grand Union Housing Group - <b>Chair</b>
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain – <b>Facilitator</b> and <b>Minutes</b>
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice - Leighton Linlade
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Gill Eden	Money Advice at St Andrews
James Hurd	Revenues and Benefits - Bedford Borough Council
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Renata Kania	Money Advice Team - BPHA
Yasmina Mahmood	Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council
Julie May	Citizens Advice - Mid Bedfordshire
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Terrienne Wilcox	Citizens Advice - Bedford

### Apologies

Donna Bradshaw	Hightown Housing Association
Karina Chamberlain	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Luton
Noor D'Agostino	Catalyst Housing
Naomi Frossell	Christians Against Poverty
Mary Hagon	Salvation Army Bedford
Alyssa Hearnden	Grand Union Housing Group
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Bedford
Julie Luckman	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice - Mid Bedfordshire
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Wendy Swain	Infotrain
Carol Weston	Money Advice at St Andrews
Briony White	Customer Finance – Central Bedfordshire Council

**NB** We organised a **trial online connection** for the meeting at short notice with Karen Lister and Mary Hagon (Salvation Army Bedford) but this blended approach did not work very effectively and had to be cut short during the meeting.

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire  
Advice Forum

In partnership with



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<b>Item</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Welcome, introductions and apologies</b>	
	Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting. Due to the Covid pandemic, this was the first, physical BBN meeting for 2 years.  Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.	
<b>2</b>	<b>Minutes of last meeting (30<sup>th</sup> September 2021)</b>	
	The minutes were generally agreed as correct. However, Terriane pointed out that Afghan refugees, under the Resettlement Scheme, are exempt from the Habitual Residence Test and the Past Presence Test for <b>all</b> benefits – not just means-tested benefits. (See <b>Item 4 – Benefits update – Other benefit changes</b> )  <b>Matters Arising</b>  <b>Item 6.1 (DWP)</b> - Philippa reported that she had found out that the DWP satellite office at Manton Lane, Bedford was now open. But it only deals with claimants under the age of 25.	
<b>3</b>	<b>Benefit changes since last meeting</b>	
	Elliott had prepared a presentation covering the main changes to benefits (and related financial support) over the last few months. This covered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal Credit</li> <li>• Other benefits</li> <li>• Other financial help</li> </ul> <p>Len will distribute Elliott's presentation slides after the meeting.</p> <p>Queries / comments relating to the presentation were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Disabled students</b>– Wendy gave an example of a case about an autistic student who had received poor advice from DWP about claiming UC.</li> <li>• Have the <b>Local Housing Allowance rates</b> for councils been frozen? Yes, the increases made in the pandemic have remained.</li> <li>• <b>Council Tax rebate</b> – £150 rebate is being paid to help with increasing energy costs. The rebate, for people in Bands A-D will be paid by both Central Beds Council and by Bedford Borough Council. James explained that this was straightforward for claimants paying CT by direct debit. But those not using direct debit will have to complete a form and provide their bank details. Details will be provided with the CT bills going out shortly.</li> <li>• <b>Definition of terminal illness</b> – The rules have been changed for UC but there is a delay in the change for DLA, PIP and AA.</li> </ul>	LS

4	<p><b>Other benefit issues and updates</b></p>	
	<p>A number of issues were raised:</p> <p><b>Homes for Ukraine Scheme</b> - The £350 a month payment for those offering accommodation to Ukrainian families is not taxable and will not affect a host's benefits entitlement or Council Tax situation.</p> <p><b>UC and pensioners</b> - Sam raised the issue of delays for people moving off UC when they reach state pension age. State Pension needs to be claimed but there are delays in getting initial payments. Also HB needs to be claimed as there are no housing costs run-on after UC stops, and housing costs are not included in Pension Credit. Elliott said that, if some specific scenarios are submitted, we could pass these onto the DWP.</p> <p><b>Recovery of overpayments</b> - Karen B. reminded attendees that if a claimant has a problem with the amount of benefit deduction being used to repay an overpayment, they can try to negotiate the repayment level with the Debt Management Team at the DWP.</p> <p><b>Decisions on disability benefits</b> – Sam raised the issue of some poor decisions being made by the DWP on disability benefits. Karen had examples of the DWP querying the lack of supporting medical evidence for some claims, despite it being very difficult to obtain evidence from GPs and consultants due to Covid closures and delays in getting GP and hospital appointments. Terriane also brought up a case where a PIP re-assessment occurred resulting in an alleged backdated overpayment.</p> <p><b>Independent Assessment Service</b> – A PIP review, on the telephone, took place while a claimant was in a psychiatric unit. The DWP showed little understanding of mental illness. Elliott suggested making a complaint</p>	LS
5	<p><b>Updates from the local benefit offices</b></p>	
5.1	<p><b>DWP</b></p> <p>No response or news received recently from the DWP, despite invitations to the BBN meeting.</p>	
5.2	<p><b>Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>James gave an update.</p> <p>Various changes in UC rules (eg taper changes) resulted in a total of almost 20,000 change notifications having to be made to HB claimants – with HB entitlement changing regularly. Workloads have therefore been very heavy and there have been some delays. They are now catching-up.</p> <p>Overall HB caseload is reducing However, there has been an increase in the number of claims for HB for people in exempt supported accommodation. More landlords seem to be trying to get their accommodation considered under this status.</p>	

<p><b>6.3</b></p>	<p>This year's DHP budget has been slightly overspent. Any new applications are being held over until the new financial year. But the DHP budget has been cut to £229,000 in 2022/23. There is usually a 4-6 week turnaround on decisions. Awards are usually for 3 months.</p> <p>Demand for Discretionary Housing Payments may increase because of rising energy costs and general inflation. The top 2 priority areas for DHPs are families and homelessness. Payments are not usually made for rent in advance or for rent arrears of more than £3,000.</p> <p><b>Central Bedfordshire Council</b></p> <p>Julie had sent some detailed information in her absence. Most of these issues were covered in Item 3. Len shared the following, other update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The team is under pressure with extra work. But despite being very busy, there is no backlog of work</li> <li>• Enough funds remain in the 2021/22 DHP budget to cover applications already received</li> </ul>	
<p><b>6</b></p>	<p><b>Future arrangements for Benefit Network meetings</b></p>	
	<p>Len gave a presentation on the history, and the current set-up, of the Benefit Network meetings.</p> <p>There had been a good tradition of support for local benefit advisers for over 30 years in Bedfordshire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bedfordshire Rights and Information Exchange Forum (BRIEF)</b>, supported by Bedfordshire County Council, operated for 20 years from 1989 to 2009</li> <li>• <b>Bedfordshire Benefits Network</b> was set-up in 2011 by BAF, and has run for the last 11 years</li> </ul> <p>The current model is that Len facilitates the BBN meetings, for BAF, and arranges the note taking. Elliott (in his GUHG role) chairs the meetings and provides regular benefit presentations. However, Len will be stepping back from his support work this year including the BBN facilitation.</p> <p>Elliott has said that he could take on the general facilitation work – and will also be able to continue with some presentations at the meetings. This means that we will need somebody to chair the meetings and somebody else to take the notes at the meetings.</p> <p>The general conclusion from the discussions was that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BBN meetings should carry on.</li> <li>• Holding meetings twice a year is fine.</li> <li>• Detailed notes of the meetings are useful – especially as the meetings are only twice a year</li> </ul>	

	<p>James volunteered to chair the meetings. Len suggested that a Deputy Chair would also be useful, if James was unable to attend.</p> <p>BAF will draw up a job description for a note taker and will circulate this to BBN and BAF members. A small payment can be paid for this work.</p>	
<b>7</b>	<b>Information exchange</b>	
	<p><b>Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>Yasmina reported that the social work team, and herself as the team's benefit adviser, are still working from home. The team's work now mainly focuses on the review stage of a client's care in the community rather than the earlier discharge from hospital. Home visits are now being made to clients.</p> <p><b>Autism Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Wendy reported on her benefits advice work for autistic people. She is based in Adult Services at Autism Beds but can also cover benefit enquires about autistic children and their families.</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice – Leighton Linlade</b></p> <p>Karen reported that most of their work is still done on the phone and online due to the limited interview space at the office.</p> <p><b>Carers in Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Jenny reported that CiB have got funding to establish a benefits advice service for carers on 1<sup>st</sup> April. The service will cover Bedford Borough and Central Beds. Jenny will be the new benefits adviser.</p> <p><b>BPHA</b></p> <p>Renata reported on a new Rent Allowance Fund at BPHA to help tenants who have got into rent arrears during the Covid period. Further details are on BPHA's website. Also BPHA are advertising for a Homelessness Prevention Officer / Benefits and Debt Adviser. Len will circulate the advert today.</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice - Bedford</b></p> <p>Terriane reported that they will be moving their office into the Harpur Centre in Bedford. They have too much furniture to take to the new office so they are offering various items to local VCS organisations. They are providing some face-to-face services at the moment but will be going back to a remote service during the office removal period.</p>	LS

	<p><b>Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council</b></p> <p>Sam gave an update on services. Their outreach services at Bedford Hospital and the Luton and Dunstable Hospital are still suspended. They are still providing telephone and email advice but are now also offering outreach interviews in local centres when needed eg at village halls, leisure centres, Keech Hospice, GP surgeries. They can provide help to people in Bedford Borough and Central Beds who have a cancer diagnosis, or who are in remission and are still under the care of a consultant. Referrals to the service can be self-referrals or made through a professional.</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice - Mid Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Julie reported that most advice is still being done on the phone. But home visits can be made for people who cannot access the telephone service. They are moving slowly back to providing a face-to-face service at the Biggleswade office. Overall they are generally very busy.</p> <p><b>Money Advice at St Andrews</b></p> <p>Gill reported that they had just started going back to face-to-face sessions. Although they were very busy during the Covid pandemic, referrals have dropped off recently, and they have the capacity to take on new cases.</p> <p><b>Revenues and Benefits - Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>James reported that the Council’s Customer Services Centre has re-opened for limited face-to-face appointments but they are still encouraging the public to make contact online or by phone. This is the same for Council Tax enquiries. Claims for HB and CTS can now be made online – but it was pointed out by attendees that some claimants have problems in working online and greater empathy is needed by staff in these situations.</p> <p><b>Grand Union Housing Group</b></p> <p>Elliott reported that the benefits advice team had been short staffed for a while but were now back to normal and catching up with work. The home visiting service had been postponed at different times during the Covid pandemic but was now operating normally again. Support on the phone or by email is also available.</p>	
<p><b>8</b></p>	<p><b>BAF training</b></p>	
	<p>Len gave an update on BAF’s training plans.</p> <p>Discussions about training had been held at the last BBN meeting and at February’s BAF meeting. Various suggestions had been made about future training needs including: disability benefits; pensioner benefits; Universal Credit; and the future changes to social care assessments.</p>	

	<p>BAF's Steering Group also wanted to see some training on other advice work issues – not just benefits.</p> <p>Elliott and Len will be reducing their training input so BAF will need to increase its pool of local trainers, and is therefore looking for new trainers. Karen (CALL) and Briony (CBC) showed some interest in this, for certain courses, at the last BBN meeting. Karen confirmed she was still interested. Len and Elliott confirmed that they can provide some support for any new trainers.</p> <p>BAF's Steering Group will be developing a training plan, and will be looking at applying for some funding to support this.</p>	BAF SG Group
<b>9</b>	<b>Any other business</b>	
	None.	
<b>10</b>	<b>Date of next meeting</b>	
	<p><b>10.00am on Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2022.</b></p> <p>It is planned that this will be another physical meeting in Bedford.</p>	