**Bedfordshire Benefits Network**

**Minutes of meeting**

**10:00am, Wednesday 19 March 2025**

**FACES, 147 Church Lane, Bedford, MK41 0PW**

**Present**

* James Hurd – Bedford Borough Council (Chair)
* Elliott Stephenson – (Facilitator and minutes), also representing Amplius
* Amanda Higham – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC)
* Andrea Tulloch – Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
* Chiara Mac Call – Queens Park Community Organisation (QPCO)
* Debra Aitken – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC)
* Emilia Ditri – bpha
* Ezme Anderson – bpha
* Harry Brindle – Bedford Citizens Advice
* Jenny Pulling – Mid Bedfordshire Citizens Advice
* Karen Banfield – Leighton Linslade Citizens Advice
* Karen Sharp – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
* Len Simkins – Advice Bedfordshire
* Michaela Martindale – FACES Bedford
* Moh Akhtar – Macmillan Welfare Rights
* Philippa Ward – Carer’s in Bedfordshire
* Sam Conder – Macmillan Welfare Rights
* Susan Halfpenny – Central Bedfordshire Tenancy Sustainment Team
* Tina Sullivan – Amplius
* Yasmina Mahmood – Bedford Hospital Social Work Team

**Apologies**

* Debbie Harris – Central Bedfordshire Council
* Gill Eden – Salvation Army
* Karina James – Age UK Bedfordshire
* Nichola Thompson – Hightown Housing Association
* Noor D’Agostino – Peabody
* Paulette Rennie – Bedford Self Help Group
* Renata Kania – bpha
* Ruby Malhotra – Titan Primary Care Network

**Minutes**

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| **Item** | **Subject** | | **Action** | |
| **1** | **Welcome, Introduction and Apologies** | |  | |
|  | James Hurd, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Elliott Stephenson, Facilitator, noted the apologies. | |  | |
| **2** | **Minutes of last meeting (18 September 2024)** | |  | |
|  | It was noted that the minutes stated the date of the meeting was 13 March 2024 and location was Bunyan Meeting, which was incorrect. The meeting took place on 18 September 2024, at FACES. | |  | |
| **3** | **Universal Credit Managed Migration** | |  | |
|  | Elliott gave a presentation on the latest with the Universal Credit Managed Migration.  Sam Conder corrected one point, which is that working pensioners moving from Tax Credits are told they must claim Universal Credit rather than having a choice to claim Pension Credit if they prefer.  After the presentation, a discussion took place regarding the following topics:   * Claimants migrating from ESA not retaining their unfit for work status – but this is now resolved * Some claims have seen errors in calculating the transitional element * Untidy tenancies – where one tenant is absent from the home – continue to cause problems where the remaining tenant is assumed to be liable for only half the rent. There is legislation to get around this but difficult to get DWP to use it. * Whenever there are problems, it is often difficult to get DWP to resolve it. * Claimants needing to migrate having difficulty knowing when is best to time the claim, e.g. missing out on a four weekly Tax Credit payment. * Tax Credit overpayments that crop up after migration – with Tax Credit office being closed down, how will these be challenged? * Separation of joint claimant means first claimant removes second from claim, causing loss of income. | |  | |
| **4** | **Benefit changes and news** | |  | |
|  | Elliott continued his presentation, first of all discussing the Green Paper ‘Get Britain Working’ announced the day before by the government. This announced plans to cut access to PIP and link LCWRA element on UC to PIP being awarded.  Sam Conder added that the changes also include the abolishment of the new-style contribution based ESA and JSA benefits, replaced by a time limited insurance which isn’t means-tested.  Harry Brindle also added that the government plans to increase Work Capability Assessment reviews before they are cancelled.  Elliott’s final part of the presentation discussed other benefit changes announced over the last 6 months, including amendments to Universal Credit; case law around erosion of the transitional element under Universal Credit; changes relating to children including the trial of universal breakfast clubs for all children (11 schools in and around Bedford are included in this trial); and changes proposed but not yet implemented including Statutory Sick Pay and the Debt, Fraud and Error bill.  Elliott’s presentation is included with the minutes. | |  | |
| **5** | **Updates from the local benefit offices** | |  | |
| **5.1**  **5.2**  **5.3** | **Jobcentre Plus:** No attendees or update on this occasion.  Sam Conder mentioned it is now possible to request proof of entitlement online, here: <https://secure.dwp.gov.uk/get-a-proof-of-benefit-letter/>  **Bedford Borough Council**  James gave an update: No change to Council Tax Reduction scheme. Annual Council Tax bills have gone out. James advised to go into Council Tax account online to view CTR entitlement – letters are not sent out automatically. Can also go to Customer Services. Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) budget fully spent this year.  LWP may be ended in Bedford.  **Central Bedfordshire Council**  DH: Update was just no change to their Council Tax Support scheme other than the income bands are being changed.  A discussion began about the Household Support Grant – James stated there may be some changes to how these schemes work in both councils; details are not yet known.  Tina noted that more benefit review letters being received for CBC residents. James said yes this is part of a fraud and error drive for all councils, they previously focused on supported housing, now they are turning on to pension age claims. Bedford Borough Council will liaise with housing providers to ensure pensioners have support to complete forms. | |  | |
| **6** | **Information Exchange** | |  | |
|  | **BRASS – Andrea** asked a few questions:  A client wasn’t entitled to state pension due to insufficient contribution record, so they claimed Pension Credit but this was refused too via the phone – no actual decision letter suggests no actual decision made. Attendees advised to claim online to get an actual decision.  A young man failed his asylum claim, wife has 6 month old baby, he has to pay £20pm to health costs. Is there any help to cover costs? Suggested negotiating down the arrangement while he appeals asylum decision.  Andrea also asked what help to get basic household items? Preen in Biggleswade may able to help and may be moving to Bedford soon. FACES offered to help via a house clearance they have been offered.  Andrea explained she is the Benefits and Integration Officer for BRASS.  **Bedford Hospital Social Work Team – Yasmina** explained he supports patients being discharged from hospital  **QPCO** – Chiara stated they are now covering all of Bedford. There are two part time intervention officers. They work with individuals who are not accessing other services, try to handhold individuals to access services. They also do a free exercise class in Jubilee Park, community group at Valmiki temple in Kempston and an event called Kush Hal – primarily attended by Muslim women of Pakistani origin to meet others in their community.  **Macmillan Welfare Rights** – fully staffed, seeing people within 2-4 weeks. Lack of donations, cut backs. Macmillan grants ended completely. Lots of services at Macmillan ended or reduced.  **FACES** – projects supporting families in the Borough. Partnership Tuesdays increased, running warm space using funding from Cadent, BRCC and CA come in on Partnership Tuesdays plus ‘cuppa with a cop’. Also open for housing advice, money advice, I+E forms on Friday mornings. Slow cookers and CO alarms via Cadent.  **bpha** – Fully staffed. Rent review letters gone out. A lot of tenants worried by rent increases. Caseloads are pretty high. 3 weeks for referrals to be seen by advisor.  **Carers in Beds** – support for family of carers. Support workers, dedicated benefit advisor. Adult carers, parent carers and young carers and sibling carers, cover BBC and CBC. They are administering an NHS carers grant - £275 for a single carer, £375 for two carers in a household. To be used for carers wellbeing. Apply through Carer’s In Bedfordshire website. Unfortunately lost funding for former carers.  Len Simkins reminded meetings are organised by BAF. BAF Steering Group will be looking at whether to carry on with meetings – good attendance today suggests people want it to continue. Elliott said it will be a question of funding, which is coming now from BAF membership.  **Leighton Linslade CA** – help with all sorts of queries. Help to claim UC – national CA line, they can access DWP directly, they will also calculate transitional element and talk about timing claim. LLCA are seeing an increase of S21 applications, so they are helping people claim homelessness and housing applications.  **BRCC** – A number of teams, social prescribing, community transport, good neighbours. Amanda and Karen are becoming winter warmth agents in CB. Supporting 50+. Signing post to warm spaces, benefit checks, food vouchers. Deborah is good neighbour support officer working in Bedford rural, low level support and signposting/referrals. Karen is also a village agent in Bedford Borough – doing benefit checks for rural areas, those that can’t access other agencies, doing forms too, e.g. blue badge applications, Bromham, Clapham, Biddenham, Great Denham and Harrold.  **CBC Tenant Sustainment team**, helping council tenants. Short staffed, business as usual though. Helping claim benefits, maximise income, help to move. Looking at applications from September 2024 in CBC. Sam asked whether tenants have forecasts for expenditure when moving to bigger property due to overcrowding. Discussion about social housing still being unaffordable.  **Amplius** – Tina advised there are two advisors workig in CBC. Benefit checks, benefit appeals, blue badges, food parcels, DHP, benefit take up campaigns. Elliott added that Amplius were previously known as Grand Union Housing Group and changed their name as part of the merger.  **Bedford CA** – Bedford CA re administering HSG, outreach services at FACES, Bedford Borough and other places. Walk-in Wednesdays. Benefit advice. 4 week wait for appointment currently. Paused home visits.  **Mid Beds** **C**A – phone and email. A few face to face appt at Ampthill and Biggleswade. Offer appointments at Lidlington on Weds evening, twice a month at Stotfold. Ask the bureau and ask for Lidlington and Stotfold appointments. Do have an out reach worker that does home visits for PIP, shared with Bedford. | |  | |
| **7** | **BAF Training** | |  | |
|  | Len gave an update on behalf of BAF as BAF Training Consultant.  BAF ran 8 courses, 74 people trained. Good feedback. However, bookings and attendance was lower than previous years and one course had to be cancelled due to low bookings. BAF Steering Group to duscuss further. | |  | |
| **7** | **Any Other Business** | |  | |
|  | Chiara talked about the way legislation is introduced through parliament and that there are opportunities to influence. This may even be an idea for training. | |  | |
| **8** | | | **Date of future meetings** | |
|  | | | Provisional dates for the next two meetings are suggested ss follows, both Wednesdays at 10am to 12pm. The venue is intended to again be at FACES. Confirmation will be provided once BAF has decided whether to continue the meetings. | |

**10th Sep 2025 and 11th Mar 2026**