

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 30th September 2021

Online Teams meeting

Present

Elliott Stephenson	BAF / Grand Union Housing Group - Chair
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain – Facilitator
Wendy Swain	Infotrain - Minutes
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Karina Chamberlain	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Luton
Neelam Chandar	One Support – One Housing
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Alyssa Hearnden	Grand Union Housing Group
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Bedford
Julie May	Citizens Advice Mid Beds
Yasmina Mahmood	Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council
Roger Pearse	Salvation Army Bedford
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Self-Help Group
Briony White	Customer Finance - Central Bedfordshire Council
Terriane Wilcox	Citizens Advice Bedford

Apologies

Noor D'Agostino	Catalyst Housing
Mary Hagon	Salvation Army Bedford
Debbie Harris	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
James Hurd	Revenues and Benefits - Bedford Borough Council
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Julie Luckman	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
Francesco Martorelli	DWP
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice Mid Beds
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Carol Weston	Money Advice at St Andrews

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire
Advice Forum

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Item	Subject	Action
1	Welcome to the online meeting	
	Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting.	
2	Introductions and apologies	
	Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.	
3	Minutes of last meeting (3rd March 2021)	
	The minutes were agreed as correct. There were no matters arising.	
4	Benefit update since last meeting	
	<p>Elliott had prepared a presentation covering the main benefit changes over the last few months.</p> <p><u>Covid-19 changes</u></p> <p>The key points presented concerned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal Credit – Withdrawal of £20 a week uplift. The last assessments including the uplift would be made today and final payments would made next week. • Minimum Income Floor (for self-employed claimants) – The MIF rule was re-introduced for UC assessments on 31/7. • Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – Ending today. • Self-Employment Income Support – Applications close today. <p><u>Universal Credit changes</u></p> <p>Elliott gave updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed migration • Pay Day Shift regulations • Local Housing Allowance – Shared room rate • Deductions for Court fines • Severe Disability Premium • Help to Claim • Recovery of Hardship Payments • Bedroom Tax – Sanctuary rooms • Debt Respite Scheme 	

	<p><u>Other benefit changes</u></p> <p>Elliott gave updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pensioner news – It has been confirmed that many women had been underpaid their State Pension in the past. The process on how to claim back the shortfall is complex. Elliott will send details. <p>Elliott reported that many people eligible to claim State Pension over the summer had yet to receive any payments. The Pension Helpline is simply signposting people to their local authority to see if they are entitled to any emergency help.</p> <p>Karen mentioned that some people applying for Pension Credit are being told they are not eligible without a proper assessment. If their circumstances are unusual, they often seemed to be turned down, due to staff misunderstanding the rules.</p> <p>The grace period for those over 75 who need to pay for their TV Licence had ended. It is not clear how much enforcement there will be on this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Independence Payment – Following a Court case the DWP are reviewing PIP decisions relating to Descriptor 9 (Engaging with other people face-to-face). • Brexit and Afghanistan news - The deadline for most EEA nationals to apply for settled status in the UK was 30/6. However, this deadline has been extended for some people in certain circumstances. Letters have been sent in September giving a further month's notice before benefits are suspended. <p>Refugees coming from Afghanistan via official schemes are exempt from the Habitual Residence Test and the Past Presence Test. Karen clarified that this only applied to means-tested benefits. The different residence tests for disability and carers benefits will still apply. Elliott will clarify the slide.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other news – covering: New-style ESA; and Support for Mortgage Interest Loans. <p>Len will distribute Elliott's revised presentation slides after the meeting.</p>	<p>ES</p> <p>ES</p> <p>LS</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>Other benefit issues and updates</p>	
	<p>Elliott continued his presentation to cover other issues and future proposals covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bereavement benefits • Disability benefits • Post Office Card Accounts • Social Care – including NI / tax increases and proposed changes to financial assessments for local authority help 	

	<p>Regarding the changes to the assessments for social care costs, Briony stated that the guidance is very misleading. It fails to mention that someone's weekly income (not just capital assets) will be taken into account when making the assessments. Briony will forward some further details to Elliott.</p> <p>It was agreed that a presentation on the finalised rules for social care assessments will be arranged at a future BBN meeting – nearer to April 2023.</p> <p>Len will distribute Elliott's slides.</p>	<p>BW</p> <p>LS</p>
6	Updates from the local benefit offices	
6.1	<p>DWP</p> <p>No news received from Bonita. Francesco is on leave this week.</p> <p>Len enquired if anyone was aware if the satellite DWP office at Manton Heights was open yet? No one was aware.</p> <p>Samantha said there was some noticeable staff turnover at the DWP. Work coaches were leaving but clients were not always being informed – and are then not receiving any responses to their emails or calls.</p>	
6.2	<p>Bedford Borough Council</p> <p>James is on leave this week. No update received.</p>	
6.3	<p>Central Bedfordshire Council</p> <p>Both Julie and Debbie are on leave this week.</p> <p>Julie had sent some information in her absence which Len shared with the meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HB and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) workloads – work is busy but under control with no back-logs. • DHPs - the annual budget for 2021/22 is £349,000, which they believe will be enough for the year. • EU Settled Status (EUSS) – DWP benefit recipients who have still not applied for EUSS have been contacted in September giving them 28 days to apply. If they do not take action, DWP will suspend their benefits. This may also affect any HB paid. • Bedroom Tax – an extra bedroom is allowed, if it is as a Domestic Sanctuary. • Afghan Resettlement Scheme – Afghan refugees will be allowed recourse to public funds such as HB, and will be able to work. However, the Benefit Cap will still apply. 	

7	Future arrangements for Benefit Network meetings	
	<p>A brief discussion took place about whether to return to face-to-face meetings (the Covid situation allowing) or continue with online meetings.</p> <p>It was felt that the online meetings had worked well and had proved to be very important for advisers keeping in touch during the lockdowns. However, there was general agreement that we should return to physical meetings as soon as we can, due to the important benefits of networking and face-to-face interaction at the meetings. But, it was also decided that online meetings could still be used, if there is an need for an extra meeting, where information sharing is needed urgently.</p>	
8	Information Exchange	
	<p>Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade</p> <p>Karen updated that business was continuing as normal. There had been an increase in Council Tax issues, and enquiries about bailiffs and debts. Also there had been a lot of poor decisions on DLA and PIP claims, which is ongoing and is taking up a lot of time.</p> <p>Customer Finance - Central Bedfordshire Council</p> <p>Briony stated they are swamped with people restarting their home care packages and needing reassessment. People now appear to be happy with carers coming into their homes again. Also families are no longer able to carry out caring duties themselves as people are returning to work.</p> <p>Salvation Army Bedford</p> <p>Karen reported they had been very quiet over the summer but things had started to pick up with 6 new clients in the last few weeks. In July they had their first face-to-face session in the large hall at the Salvation Army making it Covid safe. They are expecting face-to-face contacts to increase in the next few weeks, but they are still happy to provide remote services as well. They are also very pleased to be getting new volunteers joining the organisation.</p> <p>Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council</p> <p>Sam stated that Hinchingsbrook and Peterborough Hospitals were back to having face-to-face meetings, however this was not the case at Bedford and Luton & Dunstable Hospitals. They are checking every 2 weeks to see if anything has changed but at the moment the team is still carrying out phone appointments. Macmillan is expanding its support line services for debt advice, financial advice, and in-work support. They are recruiting staff for their support lines. The service may be moving to becoming more of a national support service rather than a regional service.</p>	

Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire

Julie updated they are doing home visits again but not as many as before. Clients are happy to use the phone which means they can contact more clients in a day. They are planning to return to the Amphill office for face-to-face meetings soon. But the Biggleswade office is too small, with not enough ventilation, for face-to-face visits. The summer was busy but there were few PIP claims – which seems to be the general trend.

Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council

Yasmina is continuing to work from home making telephone appointments from social worker referrals.

One Support – One Housing

Neelam reported they have had an influx of referrals regarding housing needs/debt/UC and PIP. At the moment they are still working remotely however the offices are now open for visits, as the Foodbank is offering a drop-in service. The duty line is still open and people are being seen at Clarence House but they need to take a lateral flow test. The wait time for new referrals is 8 weeks due to the high volume.

Bedford Community Self-Help Group

Paulette stated they are still not carrying out face-to-face meetings with clients but are still able to help some people.

Grand Union Housing Group

Elliott updated they have been very busy with benefit and debt advice. Alyssa stated that PIP reviews have picked up, and a number of errors have been made on UC decisions, resulting in cases needing to be escalated.

Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Luton

Karina reported that clinics at the KEECH Hospice had re-started in May. The community benefit clinics also started at the beginning of September but sessions have yet to start again at the L&D Hospital and are not likely to until next year. There has been an increase in PIP reviews since the DWP embargo was lifted. There has also been an increase in the number of patients coming through over the last month after receiving a cancer diagnosis – because many appointments and treatment sessions had been cancelled in the pandemic.

Citizens Advice Bedford

Terrienne stated the summer had been quiet but it was now picking up with the office open 4 days a week. Clients can drop in for general information, but if they want to see someone for advice, it is by appointment only.

	<p>Autism Bedfordshire</p> <p>Len announced that that AB had appointed Wendy Jephcote as their new benefits advisor.</p> <p>BAF</p> <p>Len updated that Bedfordshire Advice Forum had worked to support the Advice Strategy in Central Bedfordshire for the past 10 years, bringing together CBC and the local advice sector. The Council had recently decided that continuing with the Strategy is not the best way forward, and they are looking at developing a new partnership framework.</p>	
9	BAF training	
	<p>Len gave an update on BAF's training in 2021. Due to the Covid pandemic BAF had provided online training for the first time this year.</p> <p>An intensive UC programme was developed at the beginning of the year. BAF's original full-day UC course had been updated and broken down into 4 short sessions. Programmes were then successfully provided to 32 people in January and February.</p> <p>Later in the year BAF developed a shorter "Overview of UC" course. This was a 2 hour session aimed at local community staff. The course was provided in May as a small pilot for a local academy in Bedford. And then a wider course was run in July, with 16 attendees.</p> <p>Both courses are now "on the shelf", and can be run again when needed – although BAF does not have the trainer capacity to do this in 2021.</p> <p>Hopefully some further training can be organised in 2022. In future, it is likely that BAF will start using a blended approach to training with some physical courses and some, shorter courses provided online.</p> <p>Elliott asked if anyone is interested in becoming a BAF trainer. Karen expressed in interest for 2022.</p> <p>Briony may also be able to help with presentations on social care assessments. (After the meeting Briony also made some suggestions for future BAF training on: disability benefits – including PIP and carers' benefits; pensioner benefits - including Pension Credit; and bereavement benefits)</p>	
10	Any other business	
	<p>Paulette asked about the qualifying age to claim Winter Fuel Payments, as some clients had been having issues with this.</p> <p>Alyssa confirmed that claimants need to have reached the age of 66 by the qualifying week. They will be eligible this winter if they had been born on or before 26/09/55.</p>	

11	Date of next meeting	
	10.00am on Wednesday 16th March 2022. It is hoped that this can be a physical meeting in Bedford.	