

**Bedfordshire Benefits Network**  
**Minutes of meeting**  
**10:00am, Wednesday 11 March 2026**  
**FACES, 147 Church Lane, Bedford, MK41 0PW**

**Present**

- James Hurd – Bedford Borough Council (Chair)
- Elliott Stephenson – (Facilitator and minutes), also representing Amplus
- Alice Hollingdale – Age UK Bedfordshire
- Amanda Higham – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
- Farhana Chaudhury – Central Bedfordshire Council Tenancy Sustainment Team
- Harry Brindle – Bedford Citizens Advice
- Jenny Pulling – Mid Bedfordshire Citizens Advice
- Karen Banfield – Leighton Linlade Citizens Advice
- Karen Fiore – FACES
- Karina James – Age UK Bedfordshire
- Philippa Ward – Carers in Bedfordshire
- Sam Conder – Macmillan Welfare Rights
- Yasmina Mahmood – Bedford Hospital Social Work Team

**Apologies**

- Andrea Tulloch – Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support
- Debbie Harris – Central Bedfordshire Council
- Len Simkins – Advice Bedfordshire
- Michaela Martindale – FACES
- Nichola Thompson – Hightown Housing
- Noor D'Agostino – Peabody
- Renata Kania - bpha

**Minutes**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Welcome, Introduction and Apologies</b> James Hurd, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and attendees introduced themselves. Elliott Stephenson, Facilitator, noted the apologies.	
<b>2</b>	<b>Minutes of last meeting (10 September 2025)</b> One correction was noted, from section 7 any other business, the minutes stated pension age was rising to 67, this should have read <b>68</b> . No other matters arising were noted.	
<b>3</b>	<b>Universal Credit Managed Migration</b> Elliott gave a presentation on the latest with the Universal Credit Managed Migration. It was noted this might be the last time we discuss the topic as migration is due to finish this month, apart from a small amount of claims.	
<b>4</b>	<b>Benefit changes and news</b> Elliott continued his presentation, continuing with Universal	

Credit and then other benefits.

Sam Conder added that, in relation to the changes to LCWRA element of Universal Credit, cancer patients now face requiring assessments to determine which rate they qualify for unless they are terminally ill.

Sam also asked the question of what rate of LCWRA a pensioner as part of a mixed-age couple would get if they qualify for LCWRA due to being entitled to a disability benefit. The answer was not known and may rely on being tested in court.

Karen Banfield asked a question about Employment and Support Allowance claims being converted from contribution-based to 'new-style' and what this means for those that are reassessed from having Limited Capability for Work-Related Activity to just Limited Capability for Work – will their claim be time limited. The answer was not known.

Sam Conder stated she had seen instances of ESA not paying but still being taken into account as income under Universal Credit.

With regards to the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF), James Hurd was able to add to this from a Bedford Borough perspective. He explained that where authorities are not unitary, the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) and Household Support Fund (HSF) budgets cannot be merged until 2029. This does not apply to Bedfordshire councils who are unitary.

For Bedford Borough, DHPs will simply be renamed 'Housing Payments'. Forms are being changed to reflect the change in name and it is expected they will otherwise operate the same. The same amount of money is being made available.

With regards to the crisis payments part of CRF, a decision on this for Bedford Borough is not expected before June 2026. There is more money available for this compared to HSF.

Elliott's presentation for items 3 and 4 is included with the minutes.

## **5 Updates from the local benefit offices**

**5.1 Jobcentre Plus:** No attendees or update on this occasion. The partnership manager for Bedford has recently changed.

### **5.2 Bedford Borough Council**

James gave an update. He said there are currently only about 20 more Housing Benefit cases to be migrated to Universal

Credit in Bedford.

James explained that his advisers now spend much of their time on Council Tax Reduction (CTR). There are still claims for Housing Benefit for pensioners, as well as working-age people in temporary (about 900 people) and supported accommodations (about 1000 people).

James stated some supported schemes are being declassified by landlords as support available has reduced, which means those residents would need to claim Universal Credit instead if working-age.

Local Authorities are becoming responsible for licensing supported accommodation and the government are asking authorities to plan for this.

There is a situation where some people are stuck in temporary or supported accommodation because there is no suitable follow-on housing for them to move on to, costing more money in benefits to fund the rent.

Bedford Borough had consulted on changing their CTR scheme to reduce the amount of support is provides to residents. However this proposal was rejected by councillors so the scheme remains the same for 2026/27. They are exploring introducing a banded scheme but this would be no earlier than 2027/28 now as the scheme is set for the year.

Claims for DHP outstanding in Bedford Borough will be treated as claims for Housing Payments from CRF without the applicant needing to reapply.

Sam Conder stated she has had a client wait a year for their housing application at Bedford Borough to be assessed. James stated there is currently a consultation open for changing the housing allocation policy.

### **5.3 Central Bedfordshire Council**

Elliott reported that Debbie Harris gave an update by email with her apologies.

This stated that following Central Bedfordshire Council's consultation for changing their Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme, this was approved by councillors. It will mean the amount of liability considered for support for each band will change as follows

Those who currently get 100% of their liability reduced will have 75% reduced instead. Those who currently get 75% will

see this change to 55%. Those who get 50% will get 40%. Those who get 25% will still get 25%.

Debbie's updated also stated that the DHP budget is spent and that all pension age claims for Housing Benefit will again be reviewed during 2026/27. There was no update regarding the CRF.

## **6 Information Exchange**

### **Carers in Bedfordshire – Philippa**

Philippa explained that Carers in Bedfordshire unfortunately lost the contracts with Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough councils to provide support to carers in Bedfordshire via a tendering process, which takes affect from 6 April 2026. This represents 65% of their income.

The new provider is a company called Disability Direct who are not local, based in Derby. They have sub-companies called Blue Sky Brokers who organise direct payments for those with funded care and Blue Sky Carers Support who would take over the support for carers. This includes the Carers Lounge at Bedford Hospital.

Carers in Bedfordshire will continue to operate as they still have contracts to provide support for young carers in Bedford Borough and newly for adult carers in Luton Borough, based out of Luton and Dunstable Hospital where they will provide support to people who become new carers. However, it is not yet clear whether some staff and volunteers may be TUPEd over to the new firm or face redundancy.

### **Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade – Karen Banfield**

Karen stated it is business as usual, continuing to see issues with benefits, particularly long waiting times for Work Capability Assessments, PIP assessments and tribunal hearings.

### **Macmillan Welfare Rights – Sam**

Sam had previously updated the group that the Welfare Rights service was being discontinued, however Macmillan have since agreed to provide funding for some service to continue. There were around 130 services which have been grouped into 12 regional services. 11 of these around the country are now being delivered by Citizens Advice with the exception of the East region including Bedfordshire, where it will be run by Hertfordshire County Council. Funding from local councils has ended. Service will include working out of King's Lynn Hospital. The service will be more limited, only supporting the most vulnerable clients, others will only get benefit checks and be signposted to other services.

### **Bedford Hospital Social Work Team – Yasmina**

Yasmina stated it is as business as usual. All referrals come via social workers only, but she is very busy.

### **Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity – Amanda**

Amanda stated that the Winter Warmth project comes to an end at the end of March 2026, so she will become a Village Agent; although, this service is currently out to tender. She will however continue with 10 hours per week as a Community Agent in Sandy funded by Sandy Town Council, and will also run a welcome space in Sandy. BRCC continue to have social prescribers and offer community support and IT support.

### **FACES – Karen Fiore**

Karen stated FACES continue to run their Warm Space on Fridays 10am-12pm, which provides support with energy, housing and benefit issues. This includes Housing Officers from Bedford Borough on the 1<sup>st</sup> Friday of the month, which is very popular and Karen recommended booking well in advance.

FACES also run Partnership Tuesday, each Tuesday of the month has a different agency come in between 12pm and 2pm. 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday of month is BRCC, 2<sup>nd</sup> is LEAP providing energy advice, 3<sup>rd</sup> is Citizens Advice (booking also recommended) and 4<sup>th</sup> is Pathway2Recovery, focused on those newly accessing the service, for support with addictions.

They continue to run holiday pop-up shops. Referrals by professionals can be made for families who need support during holidays with food but do not qualify for vouchers via Free School Meals.

Karen said to book, call the FACES office or email [office@facesbedford.org](mailto:office@facesbedford.org)

### **Central Bedfordshire Council Tenancy Sustainment Team – Farhana**

Farhana stated they are developing an online referral form for tenants, as they are finding they are often only getting involved once it gets to crisis and they would like to do more proactive work. They continue to hold Tenant Engagement Days at a variety of locations where departments and other agencies are available to provide support.

### **Age UK – Alice and Karina**

Alice stated they provide information and advice about benefits, filling forms, via both office appointments and home visits across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire. Most clients are pension age so they mainly deal with Pension

Credit, Attendance Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support.

Karina stated Get Set For Winter ends at the end of March but will restart in September. They are going to start a coffee morning in Wixams soon with the aim of tackling loneliness and help people plan for retirement.

### **Citizens Advice Bedford and Mid-Bedfordshire – Harry and Jenny**

Harry confirmed the Bedford and Mid Beds Citizens Advice bureaux have merged into one organisation. Their work continues the same with outreach at a variety of locations. There is about a 6 week wait for appointments but they have increased their capacity so hope this wait time will reduce.

Jenny stated she volunteers regarding research and campaigning. She stated currently she is seeing lots of issues with digital exclusion, where help is not linking up properly. For example, people who are digitally excluded are told to go to the library but there is no help at libraries to use the computers.

### **bpha – Renata**

Renata gave an update via email to advertise a role bpha are currently recruiting to: <https://bphauk.jobs.people-first.com/jobs/details/recruitment%2Fjobdetails%2F536f628e-d7fc-4eeb-a240-19c702fa7950>

### **Amplius – Elliott**

Elliott stated Amplius continue to offer benefit advice and debt advice to their customers in Bedfordshire, and that recruitment is likely soon for more roles.

A question was asked about what the rent increase is for social housing. Elliott stated it is at CPI+1% [NB: this results in a 4.8% increase].

## **7 BAF Training**

Elliott provided an update on BAF training. BAF are running a winter training programme, so far a course on 'Benefits for People of Working Age' was delivered by Elliott online.

The next course is a half day online course on Personal Independence Payments on Tuesday 17 March, run by Karen Banfield. There are spaces available and publicity and booking forms were distributed. Booking forms should be sent to Len Simkins who is BAF's Training Consultant.

A course on 'Benefits for People of Pension Age' is also planned, with a date and trainer to be confirmed in due course.

## **7 Any Other Business**

Elliott stated that BAF will need to decide whether BBN meetings can be held during 2026-27, but with the proposal to extend BAF to include Luton due to be decided at that AGM, it is hopeful BBN can continue.

Some changes may be required, such as ensuring only BAF members can attend and possibly holding some future meetings in the south of Bedfordshire to accommodate Luton agencies.

## **8 Date of future meetings**

Proposed dates for 2026/27 were set to 16 September 2026 and 17 March 2027 – both Wednesdays between 10am to 12pm. Venues to be confirmed but likely to hold the September meeting in Bedford still.