

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 20th September 2017

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

Elliott Stephenson	Aragon Housing Association (Chair)
Samantha Lucas	DWP (Speaker)
Richard Charlton	DWP (Speaker)
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain (Facilitator and minutes)
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Maureen Bello	Hightown Housing Association
Jon Clingan	Carers in Bedfordshire
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service, CBC
James Hurd	Bedford Borough Council
Jemma James	Citizens Advice Bedford
Wendy Jephcote	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Debt Advice Service (Bedford)
Julie Luckman	Revenue and Benefits, CBC
Yasmina Mahmood	Bedford Borough Council
Ashaq Shamin	Disability Resource Centre
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire

Apologies

Fisella Afzal-Pagliari	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Noor D'Agostino	Aldwyck Housing Group
Lynn Dacey	Bedfordshire Probation Service
John Edwards	Money Advice at St Andrews
Duncan Mellonie	Bedford Borough Council
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice Mid Beds
Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Helen Turney	Bedford Citizens Housing Association
Sue Warner	Citizens Advice Mid Beds

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire
Advice Forum

In partnership with



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Housing Association

Item	Subject	Action
1	Introductions and apologies	
	Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting. Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.	
2	Minutes of last meeting (1st March 2017) and matters arising	
	The minutes were accepted as correct. Matters arising were: Item 3 – BAF training – 4 successful courses had been organised last spring, including 2 courses on Universal Credit Item 7 – Future plans for Benefits Network – BAF had agreed to continue to operate the Benefits Network in 2017/18	
3	Full Service Universal Credit at Bedford Jobcentre Plus	
	Samantha Lucas (Partnership Manager, Bedford and Central Bedfordshire Jobcentre Plus) gave an update on the Full Service Universal Credit (UC). The Full Digital Service for UC was introduced at Bedford Jobcentre Plus on 3 rd May. The Full Digital Service has now been rolled out to 101 Jobcentre Plus offices. An extra 50 a month will go live each month from October. Full digital UC will be available across the whole UK by September 2018. Changes to the UC system are still regularly being made. The system can be updated in real time. To keep up-to-date Sam is having fortnightly meetings with local authorities and with the DWP's Bolton Service Centre. She has also met the social landlord network at BPHA, and can also meet private landlords. The DWP will be introducing a landlord web portal to help verify rents. There is a local team of work coaches who interview new claimants at Bedford Jobcentre Plus. They have introduced a new booking system for appointments. They can also make home visits if people cannot leave home. Richard Charlton (Service Innovation Lead) explained that he manages this team and is responsible for UC system issues and home visits. Len will circulate Richard's contact details. They will also be migrating UC (Gateway) claimants onto the new digital service. 223 had been booked to migrate although some of these have not in fact been eligible. When contacted claimants are given 14 days to complete an online UC claim and arrange an interview with a work coach.	Len

	<p>There have been just under 2,000 new UC claims since May. About 1,000 claimants have been jobseekers.</p> <p>Sam and Richard were thanked for their update. Some questions were then put.</p> <p>Q. Claimant does not have access to IT. Has a serious health condition. A. Home visit can be made. Claim can also be managed over the phone but the claimant and adviser would need to be together.</p> <p>Q. Claimant has terminal illness (for PIP). How can adviser let the DWP know about this for UC without having to inform the client? A. Richard will check on process for this.</p> <p>Q. Claimant is housebound. Can adviser claim in advance for client? Or use backdating rules? A. Can contact Richard to discuss. Home visits can be arranged in 4-5 working days.</p> <p>Some comments were also made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear when a managed payment (for housing costs made direct to a landlord) has been made • Claimants are still getting advice from the JobCentre Plus staff that they must claim UC when they want to claim new style JSA or ESA • Citizens Advice had recently produced a national report on UC. A newspaper article earlier in the week quoted the report and was saying UC is now a “train wreck”. There were long delays in processes and confusion in the interpretation of rules • Some questions on the UC claim form were confusing eg the “working / not working” question? Shouldn’t this be “employed / not employed?” 	
<p>4</p>	<p>Impact of other 2017 benefit changes</p>	
	<p>Elliott ran through the main, recent changes and asked if there had been any issues or problem cases.</p> <p><u>2 child limit (for UC, CTC and HB)</u></p> <p>Some families are not aware of the change in the rules</p> <p>There is a software problem for Housing Benefit and some restrictions have been made in error</p> <p>CPAG is looking for test cases on this issue. Claimants should appeal if restricted.</p> <p><u>Abolition of Work Related Activity Component (in ESA and UC)</u></p> <p>There was a query about a JSA claimant who has become sick. He should now claim UC, if s/he is in the Bedford Jobcentre Plus area. There would then be a change in the person’s claimant commitment.</p>	

	<p><u>Restrictions for young people aged 18-21 (for UC)</u></p> <p>No issues or cases were raised.</p> <p><u>Bereavement Support Payment</u></p> <p>This is a simplified benefit. But there are some losers as well as winners.</p> <p>No problems were reported</p>	
5	Update on other Welfare Reform Issues	
5.1	<p>Benefit Cap</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James reported that in Bedford Borough the numbers of claimants capped is steady. They only use the cap when instructed by the DWP. Julie reported that things were the same in Central Bedfordshire. • Discretionary Housing Payments can be given by the LAs to help claimants who are capped. • CPAG is challenging the benefit cap under Human Rights law with a case from a lone parent with a child under 2 	
5.2	<p>Personal Independence Payment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are still poor assessment decisions being made. There is also a low success at the mandatory reconsideration stage. But there is a high level of success at appeals • Appeals are now taking 16-18 weeks to be heard • The appeal venue in Bedford changed from September. It is now at the River Street Court Complex 	
5.3	<p>Local Welfare Provision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A newspaper article from last week said “Local welfare schemes in meltdown” with many councils closing their LWP service or offering threadbare service • James confirmed that the LWP scheme in Bedford Borough would continue to operate next year. They will be focusing more on community grants rather than crisis payments. BBC can provide an update at the next BBN meeting. CBC will also provide an update on their scheme. 	
5.4	<p>Housing Benefit - “Bedroom Tax”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of claimants affected is going down • The UC rules are similar to HB – but a claimant will need to re-present their evidence if claiming UC. 	

6	Updates from the local benefit offices	
6.1	<p>Jobcentre Plus</p> <p>They have been appointing new staff on a regular basis. 79 new Work Coaches have been appointed across Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.</p> <p>Some comments were made about local DWP services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The atmosphere at Bedford Jobcentre Plus now seemed very calm and collaborative • A claimant had an issue about claiming online. They were told they have to claim online – but it is possible to do so on the telephone • Claimants need to book an appointment to claim new style ESA but there does not seem to be telephone number <p>Some questions were put:</p> <p>Q. Is the Work Coach always the same person? A. Generally yes – but it can be changed, if necessary</p> <p>Q. Is some IT support given at the Bedford office to make an online claim? A. Yes but an appointment needs to be made. Some support can also be given at Bedford Borough Council.</p>	
6.2	<p>Housing Benefit Office - Bedford Borough Council</p> <p>Some questions were put to James.</p> <p>Q. If a new UC claim fails, can HB be re-instated? A. Yes – if they still qualify</p> <p>Q. Is HB still paid for people in supported accommodation? A. Yes, but when they leave the accommodation and find a rented property, HB will stop and UC will then cover the rent.</p> <p>James admitted that HB staff are still learning the new system</p>	
6.3	<p>Housing Benefit Office - Central Bedfordshire</p> <p>Julie gave an update.</p> <p><u>Universal Credit</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 25% of local claimants had been affected by the full digital UC system (through Bedford Jobcentre Plus). Other areas in CB will come under the full service in summer/autumn 2018. Until then, new claimants in the other areas (eg with SG and LU postcodes) will continue to claim HB. • Some claimants seem reluctant to claim UC • CAB can providing budgeting support for UC claimants but the take-up is low 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 158 Council Tax Support claimants are on UC • DHP – 20 payments have been made to UC claimants • There have been some problems in getting details of UC breakdown for claimants <p><u>Housing Benefit</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HB claims can now be made online • The DHP budget is 50% spent. They are dealing with DHPs on a case by case basis <p><u>Council Tax</u></p> <p>Ebilling and Epayments are now available</p>	
7	Information exchange	
	<p>Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity – Wendy explained about the Local Community Coordinators that have been appointed in 4 areas in Bedford. Referrals can be made by anybody</p> <p>Macmillan Welfare Rights – Sam reported on job vacancies at Peterborough and Hinchingsbrooke Hospitals.</p> <p>Citizens Advice Leighton Lindlsade – Karen reported that there has been a big increase in enquiries about ESA and PIP.</p> <p>Carers in Bedfordshire – Jon reported on his agency’s work and his own role. They deal with carers of all ages from the young to the elderly. Jon works with parent carers. Transfers from DLA to PIP are a big issue. There are also a large number of social issues and child protection issues.</p>	
8	Any other business	
	<p>There had been some delays in completing the minutes of the previous meeting. Len had recently put out a request for some paid administrative support to help with future minutes for the BBN meetings. However, nobody had registered an interest in this.</p>	
9	Date of next meeting	
	<p>10.00 am on Wednesday 7th March 2018. Venue to be confirmed.</p> <p>(Date later changed to 14th March)</p>	