

# BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

## MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2018

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

### Present

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Elliott Stephenson    | Grand Union Housing Group - Chair                               |
| Len Simkins           | BAF / Infotrain - Facilitator                                   |
| Fsella Afzal-Pagliari | Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity                          |
| Moonsur Ali           | Grand Union Housing Group                                       |
| Shanara Akther        | One Support Bedford   |
| Karen Banfield        | Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade                                |
| Angela Carter         | bpha  |
| Jon Clingan           | Carers in Bedfordshire  |
| Samantha Conder       | Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Central Bedfordshire Council |
| Debbie Cox            | Stonewater Housing  |
| Jade Gaynor           | Community Welfare - Bedford Borough Council                     |
| Mary Hagon            | Salvation Army Debt Advice Service (Bedford)                    |
| Renata Kania          | Citizens Advice Bedford   |
| Saleha Khanom         | Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity                          |
| Karen Lister          | Salvation Army Debt Advice Service (Bedford)                    |
| Julie Luckman         | Revenue and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council             |
| Sylvia MacDowell      | Money Advice at St. Andrews                                     |
| Yasmina Mahmood       | Adult Services - Bedford Borough Council                        |
| Jenny Pulling         | Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire                                |
| H Smith               | Hightown Housing Association                                    |
| Philippa Ward         | Carers in Bedfordshire  |
| Louise Weller         | Hightown Housing Association                                    |
| Robert Simkins        | Infotrain - Minutes   |

### Apologies

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Donna Bradshaw     | Hightown Housing Association              |
| Alison Burt        | Sight Concern Bedfordshire                |
| Karina Chamberlain | Macmillan Welfare Rights Service (Luton)  |
| Noor D'Agostino    | Aldwyck Housing Group                     |
| John Edwards       | Money Advice at St Andrews                |
| James Hurd         | Bedford Borough Council                   |
| Samantha Lucas     | DWP                                       |
| Wendy Jephcote     | Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity    |
| Paulette Rennie    | Bedford Community Self-Help Group         |
| Helen Turney       | Bedfordshire Citizens Housing Association |

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire  
Advice Forum

In partnership with



| <b>Item</b> | <b>Subject</b>  | <b>Action</b> |
|-------------|---|---------------|
| <b>1</b>    | <b>Introductions and apologies</b>  |               |
|             | Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting.<br>Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.   |               |
| <b>2</b>    | <b>Minutes of last meeting (14<sup>th</sup> March 2018) and matters arising</b>   |               |
|             | The <b>minutes</b> were accepted as correct.<br>There were no <b>matters arising</b> .  |               |
| <b>3</b>    | <b>Universal Credit</b>   |               |
|             | <p><b><u>Full Service UC in Bedford Jobcentre Plus area</u></b></p> <p>Len gave an update that had been sent by the DWP.</p> <p>Bedford JCP is performing well in terms of payment timeliness and they focus on making a full payment (including housing and childcare costs) in the first assessment period wherever possible. Full payments have been paid in 98% of UC claims.</p> <p>Private landlord cases prove to be the most challenging where the tenant does not have all the evidence required to verify housing costs. The JCP has well established relationships with local social landlords and are able to resolve any queries that could affect payment quickly when they arise.</p> <p>The landlord portal for social landlords is proving popular. It helps to verify housing costs when a claim is made, which speeds up the process. Claims are ready for payment on the same day in most cases. They are considering the next phase of landlords to be brought onto the portal and will contact them directly.</p> <p>Elliott reported on statistics given at yesterday's CRG meeting. There are now 7,000 Full Service UC cases open. These cover different family situations and therefore the claims include a lot more than 7,000 people. Full Service UC has been going well in Bedford compared to other areas.</p> <p><b><u>Plans for Full Service UC in other areas</u></b></p> <p>Len gave an update that had been sent by the DWP.</p> <p>Angela Roberts (Luton) and Sam Lucas are working together on the preparations for the roll-out in Central Bedfordshire. They have mapped which external organisations they will engage with and when, starting with the local authorities. They are running sessions for up to 100 Central Bedfordshire Council staff at Watling House on 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> September.</p> <p>Angela and Sam will both be doing UCFS presentations at community events such as Dunstable Jobsfair on 5<sup>th</sup> September. These presentations will primarily take place in September and October.</p> |               |

They have been proactive in engaging with colleagues from Citizens Advice across Central Beds (Sam is working with Leighton Buzzard and Biggleswade, and Angela will cover Dunstable). Sam has delivered a presentation on Alternative Payment Arrangements and ESA New Style for CA Biggleswade/Ampthill and will be delivering a presentation for CA Leighton Linslade in October.

Arrangements for Personal Budgeting Support and Digital Support to make a claim are already in place with CBC and these will continue with this next phase of the roll-out. Both aspects of support are delivered by Citizens Advice in Central Beds.

If partners who work in CBC have not been approached by Angela or Sam and would like to know more about the UC changes, they should contact them for help.

[samantha.lucas@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:samantha.lucas@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)  
[angela.roberts@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:angela.roberts@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

The scheduled dates for the roll-out of Full Service UC in Central Bedfordshire and Luton are:

- Bedford – already launched in March 2017
- Luton (mainly LU1 and LU2 postcodes) – 24/10/18
- Biggleswade, Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable, and Luton (all remaining postcodes) – 21/11/18
- Milton Keynes – 5/12/18

People living in Shillington will be affected by Letchworth JCP going live onto Full Service on 3/10/18.

Claimants on the old “live” version of UC will be invited to claim Full Service UC in stages. This transition, in theory, should go smoothly.

### **Other UC issues**

There were lots of problems and issues regarding Universal Credit.

**ESA claimants** - Some claimants having to transfer from ESA to UC (due to a change in circumstances) were having problems getting the additional element for those in the Support Group, and this element is not being backdated. Also some claimants in the Work Related Activity Group were wrongly not getting to keep their extra element in UC.

**Extra support for claimants** - A query was raised about claimants where English is not their first language. And some also have literacy problems and are not online. How can they contact the DWP or make an appointment? They may need an interpreter. They can't make the initial step as it's all done online. It was suggested that the adviser should contact Sam Lucas, and give details of the client group and their problems and ask for Sam's suggestions.

**Complex needs** - The JCP use complex needs plans for claimants that need extra help eg people with drug problems. They liaise with specialist support agencies when developing the plans. The contact person for complex needs plans in Central Beds is Lisa Catagna.

**Monthly payments** – Monthly assessments can cause problems - especially if a claimant is paid 4 weekly and two wage payments are made in the same calendar month. A recent CPAG report looks at these problems.

**Re-claiming UC** – It was confirmed that if UC stops one month (eg due to higher earnings that month), the claimant will not need to re-claim UC later – unless there is a gap of more than 6 months.

**Two child policy** – This is affecting large families and causing more poverty. The change in policy was not advertised fully.

**Work Coach** - Not everyone knows their allocated Work Coach or Case Manager. Names are not given on the online journal. It is important that everyone finds this out. Each individual is supposed to be assessed on their individual needs, so if there is a problem, the first port of call would be to contact the local Work Coach. After that the next step would be to contact the Case Manager (who is based in a different office), and then finally Sam Lucas (Partnership Manager). To give an adviser permission to speak to the Work Coach, Case Manager or Partnership Manager, the claimant needs to give explicit permission on their UC journal.

**Carer's Element** – Sometimes this is not being backdated correctly.

**Shared ownership** - When applying for UC the questions in the online claim do not cover shared ownership of property.

**Managed migration** - Proposed dates for migrating claimants from the legacy benefits to UC are 2019 – 2023. Claimants will need to make a new UC claim.

**Severe Disability Premium** – There is no SDP in UC. Therefore some claimants who need to transfer from legacy benefits to UC will be worse off. To protect claimants a block has been placed on the natural migration of claims to UC for SDP recipients. Transitional protection has been introduced for claimants who have already claimed UC. Transitional protection rules for later transfers are now also being considered.

**Foodbanks** – There is evidence of growing use of foodbanks in UC Full service areas especially because of delays at the start of claims.

**Social landlord portal** – bpah staff use this to verify rent detail. It seems to be working well. The only confusion comes when converting weekly charges to monthly amounts.

**Claimant journal** – It is a good idea for claimants to keep a note of anything relevant that happens on their journal.

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| <b>4</b> | <b>Update on other benefit issues</b>   |  |
| 4.1      | <p><b>Personal Independence Payment</b></p> <p>Various comments were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisers generally reported good success with PIP</li> <li>• People living in remote places who require a home visit have to wait until the assessor has a slot to visit that area. In remote areas there are sometimes months of delays. For example, a terminally ill person had to wait three months. Exceptions need to be made. It was suggested advisers could make a formal complaint and contact the local MP if they encounter problems.</li> <li>• Some claimants are having problems regarding their Blue Badge entitlement after being re-assessed for PIP. The Blue Badge scheme is currently being reviewed. Details will be given next year.</li> <li>• New guidance on the PIP Mobility descriptor regarding planning and following journeys has been issued by the DWP. This follows the legal challenge regarding “overwhelming psychological distress”. PIP awards are being re-assessed because of this</li> <li>• Some claimants have problems with appeal hearings if they can’t speak English</li> </ul> |  |
| 4.2      | <p><b>Benefit cap</b></p>   |  |
|          | <p>Some disabled clients are having their Housing Benefit capped in Bedford despite being exempt from the cap. The JCP need to be informed because the decision on the cap is made by them and then the HB Office is instructed. It is a case of trying to find the right person to speak to. Another suggestion is to contact the local MP about this.</p>   |  |
| 4.3      | <p><b>Bereavement benefits</b></p>  |  |
|          | <p><b>Widowed Parents’ Allowance</b> – This has only been paid in cases where the widower was married (or was in a civil partnership). However, a Supreme Court decision has recently awarded WPA to an unmarried widow in Northern Ireland. This will put pressure on the Government to change the WPA rules and may have an impact on the eligibility for other contribution based benefits.</p>  |  |
| 4.4      | <p><b>Other benefits</b></p>  |  |
|          | <p>Some comments were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One client has been fighting for more than a year with regard to their ESA claim.</li> <li>• It was clarified that, in a legacy benefit area, claims can be made for both contributory ESA and income-related ESA</li> <li>• Claiming contributory ESA in a UC area is still proving to be difficult. The advice on the UC helpline is often confusing. It is best to simply help somebody to claim new style ESA directly themselves. Sam Condor has obtained a claim form. She will send a copy of this for circulation.</li> </ul>  |  |

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| <b>5</b>  | <b>Updates from the local benefit offices</b>  |  |
| <p><b>5.1</b></p> <p><b>5.2</b></p> <p><b>5.3</b></p> | <p><b>Jobcentre Plus</b></p> <p>There had been a CRG meeting yesterday.</p> <p><b>Housing Benefit Office - Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>No update was available</p> <p><b>Housing Benefit Office - Central Bedfordshire</b></p> <p>Julie Luckman gave an update. Not much is going on.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The current Council Tax Reduction Scheme in CB will stay same. However, other schemes are being looked at.</li> <li>• Things are generally quite complicated at the moment – and will only be clearer when there is more information on the managed migration of UC. The earliest that the managed migration will start is 2020.</li> <li>• Following consultation, payments to help with rent for short-term supported accommodation (eg temporary accommodation) will continue to be paid through Housing Benefit and not UC.</li> </ul> <p><b>Q.</b> Two clients, who should have claimed UC but did not know, applied to CBC for HB by mistake and their claims were processed. The Council later realised that they could not pay HB because the claimants should have claimed UC. What should the claimants do? One claimant has lost out on 8 weeks of benefit due to the delays.</p> <p><b>A.</b> If the Council is at fault, the claimants should apply for Discretionary Housing Payment, and any gap in benefit could be paid in full.</p> <p><b>Q.</b> Is there any further news on whether housing costs will be incorporated into Pension Credit?</p> <p><b>A.</b> No further news.</p> <p><b>Q.</b> Where is the CBC Customer Services based now in Mid Beds?</p> <p><b>A.</b> At Shefford Library. They may also be looking at expanding the service to other libraries.</p> |  |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>BAF training programme – Autumn 2018</b>  |  |
|   | <p>Len gave details of the 3 courses in BAF's autumn training programme.</p> <p><b>Introduction to Benefits</b> – 12<sup>th</sup> September – Bedford<br/> <b>Disability Benefits</b> – 26<sup>th</sup> September – Bedford<br/> <b>Universal Credit</b> – 31<sup>st</sup> October – Dunstable</p> <p>Booking forms have been circulated. Further copies are available today.</p> <p>Len reported that, at BAF's AGM, tributes had been paid to Annette Pacey, one of BAF's regular trainers. Annette had sadly died in the summer and will be greatly missed at BAF and at bpha.</p>  |  |

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| 7 | Information exchange  |  |
|   | <p><b>From DWP CRG Meeting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Homelessness Reduction Act</b> comes into force on 1<sup>st</sup> October. 3<sup>rd</sup> party agencies can refer people who might become homeless. A red flag system will be used by local authorities, where there is a priority concern for the individual.</li> <li>• <b>Vauxhall Luton</b> are hiring 435 staff from Luton. The focus is on the long term unemployed and women in first time work</li> </ul> <p><b>Money Advice at St Andrews</b> – Can take on referrals for debt advice.</p> <p><b>Macmillan Welfare Rights Service (CBC)</b> – Are recruiting staff for Hinchinbrook Hospital. Have received more funding until December 2019</p> <p><b>One Support Bedford</b> - Still doing drop-ins 3 days a week. They provide housing intervention support, and have a hostel (Clarence House)</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice Bedford</b> – Provide a daily drop-in advice service, and can also deal with email enquiries.</p> <p><b>Stonewater Housing</b> – Provide independent living accommodation. Direct referrals can be taken from people aged 55+.</p> <p><b>Hightown Housing Association</b> – Have properties in Luton. They provide benefits support for tenants – especially on PIP claims. They also refer tenants to specialist agencies eg Macmillan.</p> <p><b>Salvation Army (Bedford)</b> – Leaflet was distributed. They provide debt advice, a foodbank service, and general support sessions.</p> <p><b>Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity</b> – Village agents and Local Community Coordinators help people in their local areas. Saleha works in Harpur and De Parys words, and Fsella works in Queens Park. Caldwell and Kingsbrook, Kempston, and Putnoe and Brickhill are also covered in Bedford. There are Village Agents for rural areas in Central Beds. Referrals can be made. They often support vulnerable adults. Fsella will send their publicity leaflet for circulation.</p> <p><b>Bedford Borough Council</b> – Provide assisted digital services and budgeting support services at Customer Services. Anyone making new claims who is not tech savvy can make contact for help. Jobcentre Plus can make referrals. If ongoing support is needed, referrals can be made to Citizens Advice Bedford.</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice Mid Beds</b> – Provide drop-in advice sessions at Biggleswade. Also have an email and telephone service, and can make appointments. Satellite service operates on Monday morning at Stotfold and Tuesday morning at Sandy</p> <p><b>Citizens Advice Leighton Buzzard</b> – They provide drop-in, email and telephone advice services. They are also providing budgeting support for Universal Credit claimants in Central Beds.</p> |  |

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|          | <p><b>bpha</b> – They are currently advertising for 2 new roles in their Financial Inclusion Team.</p> <p><b>Grand Union Housing</b> – The different housing groups in Grand Union will merge into one housing association on 1<sup>st</sup> October. The Aragon HA brand will no longer be used and the new brand will be GUHG.</p> |  |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Any other business</b>  |  |
|          | None   |  |
| <b>9</b> | <b>Date of next meeting</b>  |  |
|          | 10.00 am on 13 <sup>th</sup> March 2019. Venue to be confirmed.  |  |