

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Thursday 12th September 2019

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

Elliott Stephenson (Chair)	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins (Facilitator)	BAF / Infotrain
Wendy Swain (Minutes)	Infotrain
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Samantha Bruce	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
John Edwards	Money Advice at St Andrews
Mary Hagon	Salvation Army Debt Advice Service (Bedford)
James Hurd	Revenues and Benefits - Bedford Borough Council
Wendy Jephcote	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Debt Advice Service (Bedford)
Julie Luckman	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
Yasmina Mahmood	Adult Services - Bedford Borough Council
James Mace	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Julie May	Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
Sophie McGrath	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Helen McHugh	Autism Bedfordshire
Lindsay Measures	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Bonita Murphy	DWP
Susan Platten	DWP
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
Sharna Raine	Autism Bedfordshire
Katy Ruffles	Housing – Central Bedfordshire Council
JP Smith	Hightown Housing Association
Chante Tannis-Evans	One Support Bedford
Andy Waller	Citizens Advice Bedford
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire

Apologies

Fsella Afzal-Pagliari	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Alison Burt	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Jon Clingan	Carers in Bedfordshire
Sam Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Central Bedfordshire Council
Edward Costello	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Debbie Cox	Stonewater
Jade Gaynor	Community Welfare - Bedford Borough Council
Jon Howton	BRASS
Helen Linford	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Amanda Ryan	Bpha
Helen Turney	Bedfordshire Citizens Housing Association

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire
Advice Forum

In partnership with



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Item	Subject	Action
1	Introductions and apologies	
	<p>Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting.</p> <p>Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.</p> <p>The meeting was reminded that filming of a documentary on local activism would take place after the tea break and anybody who did not wish to be filmed should make themselves known.</p>	
2	Minutes of last meeting (13th March 2019) and matters arising	
	<p>The minutes were agreed as correct.</p> <p>Matters arising:</p> <p>Item 4 – Universal Credit – Homeless people - Jenny Pulling gave an update. A Citizens Advice report on homelessness confirmed that a PO Box can be set up for a homeless person to receive correspondence – but cannot be used to open a bank account.</p> <p>The report is available at: https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Post%20and%20Telecoms/Homelessness%20report%20-%20Final.pdf</p> <p>A Payment Exemption Service is also available. Further information can be found at www.gov.uk/payment-exemption-service</p> <p>Item 4 – Universal Credit – Special rules for terminal illness – Susan Platten reported that JCP staff have received training regarding understanding terminal illness.</p> <p>Susan will provide an updated JCP escalation list, if there are any problems. Len will circulate this.</p> <p>Item 5 – Other benefit issues – Blue Badges – Jade Gaynor (BBC) had sent through some Powerpoint slides on the new Blue Badge Scheme launched on 30/8/19. Len will circulate the slides.</p>	<p>SP LS</p> <p>LS</p>
3	Universal Credit	
	<p>Elliott Stephenson gave a presentation on recent UC changes covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed aged couples • Severe Disability Premium (SDP) • Childcare costs • Calculation of housing element in UC – 53 week rule <p>Key points were:</p> <p>‘Mixed age’ couple – This is where one partner has reached state retirement age but the other partner has not. From 15/5/19 most mixed aged couples cannot make new claims for Pension Credit, until the younger member of the couple also reaches pension age. They would need to claim UC instead.</p>	

	<p>SDP - There has been a “gateway” rule since 16/1/19 which stops anyone receiving SDP from moving onto UC, because they would be worse off. This rule will continue until 21/1/21. In the meantime compensation is being paid to claimants who did claim UC before the rule came into place.</p> <p>Child care costs - Work Coaches have the discretion to pay childcare cost upfront where is a barrier to starting work. Susan will circulate work support guidance regarding childcare costs for people in work, where there is a change in their circumstances. For after school clubs, Bonita Murphy confirmed that childcare payments can only be paid for Ofsted approved care clubs, not for educational clubs.</p> <p>53 week rule - The current system of rent payments in UC will change in the future to allow for payments to be made to cover the additional week in 53 week years, when necessary.</p> <p>Len will circulate the presentation slides which give further details of the above changes.</p>	<p>SP</p> <p>LS</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>Other benefit issues</p>	
	<p>Legacy benefits - Habitual Residence Test</p> <p>JP Smith stated that some clients had had claims for legacy benefits rejected straight away because the HRT test for UC was being applied.</p> <p>Bonita explained that the HRT for UC is a different test to that for legacy benefits, because the rules have changed. The only claimants who would fail straight away are those who have no recourse to public funds - otherwise there should be a full detailed HRT covering a list of detailed criteria. Bonita went through some of these criteria.</p> <p>Treatment of monthly wage payments</p> <p>Elliott reported that a test case had recently considered what should happen when a monthly wage is paid early, and is very close to an assessment date, which then effects the benefit entitlement. The decision was that the DWP should not consider 2 wage payments in the same assessment period, when it is clear that they are monthly payments.</p> <p>Mandatory Reconsiderations</p> <p>Elliott gave details of a CPAG report on mandatory considerations, and the difficulties that claimants have in getting benefit decisions changed and looked at again. There appears to be reluctance from the DWP to progress some reconsideration requests.</p> <p>Susan stated that if anyone is experiencing problems with cases involving vulnerable people, they should contact her team directly as they may be able to provide support, particularly if there is any new, supporting evidence. Also mandatory reconsideration requests should be “sense checked” by a team leader before to going to a decision maker for an official decision.</p>	

	<p>Advanced payments</p> <p>Karen Banfield expressed how difficult it is for some people to manage once the UC advance payments start to be recovered. The DWP will not reduce or extend the recovery period but will only delay it starting for 3 months. She stated that a claimant's circumstances often change from the time of applying for an advance payment to when they start repaying.</p> <p>Elliott added that the period for recovery is going to be extended from 12 months to 16 months.</p> <p>Susan reported there has been a recent update relating to advanced payments. Claimants will be shown more information about advances in their online accounts, and can apply after their ID has been verified and their eligibility to UC has been checked.</p> <p>Bonita added that anyone having to make a 3rd claim for an advance payment will be seen in person to make sure there is a robust assessment and they will be offered other options. If people are struggling due to hardship, the DWP can look into that. However, if the repayment is linked to a court fine, it cannot be changed - claimants have to return to court to try and get the fine reduced.</p>	
5	Updates from the local benefit offices	
5.1	<p>DWP / Jobcentre Plus</p> <p>Bonita confirmed that JCP can provide forums for Q/A sessions. If anybody has a topic to discuss they can contact her. They are currently working with the PCC and the Probation Service who are providing advice to ex-offenders.</p> <p>Susan gave an update about the housing element for UC. More information is now being required from claimants when checking on the entitlement to the additional amount for housing.</p> <p>Helen McHugh asked what planning is taking place regarding Brexit? Susan confirmed there is a team being set up for Brexit, but there is no further update at the moment due to the uncertainty. Plans have been made for a possible recession but nothing else at this stage.</p>	
5.2	<p>Bedford Borough Council</p> <p>James Hurd gave an update.</p> <p>A lot of extra people would qualify for Council Tax Support, if they submitted a claim form. BBC has identified that it can waive the necessity for a claim form, if they already have all the information needed to assess a claim. Generally a UC claim form provided all the required information, so they can then assess CTS automatically. They will be trying to automatically assess claims from next week. Potentially they we can automate the notifications from the JCP every month. This should increase BBC's CTS caseload</p>	

<p>5.3</p>	<p>Central Bedfordshire Council</p> <p>Julie Luckman gave an update.</p> <p>There will be no CTS changes in 2020/21. A decision has not been made yet whether there will be any changes in 2021/22.</p> <p>12% of their caseload now concerns UC recipients, compared to 3-4% last year.</p> <p>There were a backlog of decisions on Discretionary Housing Payments for UC claimants but they have trained more staff to help deal with this. Half the DHP budget is currently spent.</p>	
<p>6</p>	<p>BAF training programme</p>	
	<p>Len confirmed that BAF tries to organise a training programme each year, but no training has taken place yet this year. BAF's Steering Group is now planning a programme for the end of the year.</p> <p>Len asked for suggestions of courses that people would like to attend. Introduction to Benefits, PIP, and appeals were suggested by those present. LS will distribute a course programme by the end of October.</p> <p>Elliott asked if anyone would like to become a trainer. Anybody interested should contact Elliott or Len.</p>	<p>LS</p>
<p>7</p>	<p>Information exchange</p>	
	<p>BRCC - Social Prescribing Team</p> <p>Wendy Jephcote introduced Social Prescribing Team and explained what their local community co-ordination role. Social prescribing is how being used as a tool by GPs. BRCC can now place staff in GP surgeries, with CCG funding, as social prescribers. The team is based in both Bedford Borough and in Central Beds. BRCC work with people who are directly referred by GPs, and with people referred by other local organisations. Samantha Bruce clarified that the prescribers in Bedford Borough can take referrals from any organisation, however, in Central Beds prescribers can only take referrals from GPs.</p> <p>Wendy confirmed that the team gives benefit advice but will signpost clients elsewhere if the issue is outside their expertise. The main purpose of the team is to help people remain independent and living within their communities. The team do not work with anyone who is supported by the community mental health team.</p> <p>Wendy advised that a promotional leaflet is currently being produced. She will distribute this to the Benefits Network.</p> <p>Money Advice at St Andrew's (Bedford)</p> <p>John Edwards updated that BPHA have agreed to take referrals from MAS for benefit issues, and clients are not required to be BPHA tenants. This arrangement has only been in place for a couple of months but is working very well at the moment.</p>	<p>WJ</p>

Autism Beds

Helen invited members to an Understanding Autism event in November. It is mainly aimed at employers, however, other agencies are welcome to attend. Helen is trying to develop better networking groups regarding employment and volunteering opportunities for AB users.

Salvation Army Debt Advice

Karen Lister advised that their Money Advice Service is a part-time service normally open on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. If anyone has any referrals, then please ring them.

Hightown Housing Association

JP updated that Hightown HA will be covering the Bedfordshire area in future. There are developments in Leighton Buzzard and they are expanding into Houghton Regis.

Macmillan Welfare Rights - CBC

James Mace reported that the Community Welfare Rights team has been audited and they continue to be AQS accredited.

Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade

Karen advised they have been helping EU citizens apply for settled status in the UK. Only 1 million out of 3 million in the country have done so at the moment. They are also supporting people to complete the UC Habitual Residence Test as many are struggling with this. They will be promoting these services.

Citizens Advice Mid Beds

Jenny stated they still provide a Help to Claim service for new UC claimants in the Biggleswade and Ampthill areas. Sessions are held at:

- Biggleswade JobCentre - Tuesday morning for appointments, and in the afternoon for drop-in assistance
- Biggleswade Citizens Advice office – Friday for appointments only
- Ampthill Citizens Advice office – Wednesday for appointment only

Telephone advice and support for UC claims is available on: 0800 1448444 (8.00am – 6.00pm, Monday to Friday).

Online advice is available at: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/helptoclaim

Home visits can be provided in certain circumstances. Julie May is the outreach worker and can visit people to help with disability benefits and UC claims for people unable to come to the office. Julie also helps with mandatory reconsiderations and benefit appeals.

One Support (Bedford)

Chante Tannis-Evans confirmed that the One Support office had moved to Bromham Road in Bedford. They provide support for vulnerable people in the community.

	<p>Citizens Advice Bedford</p> <p>Andy Waller stated he also had information regarding the Help to Claim in Bedford. He will send this to Len for distribution.</p> <p>Andy confirmed that home visits can only be provided, if a client has been referred by Bedford Borough Council.</p> <p>Grand Union Housing Group</p> <p>Elliott stated that at the end of September their office will be moving from Ampthill to Milton Keynes. As of Monday the Ampthill office will no longer be open to the public. There will be satellite offices for staff to use but not for public visits. If someone needs to see staff, then staff will go out to them. The same range of services will continue to be provided by GUHG under the new structure.</p>	AW LS
8	Any other business	
8.1	Elliott mentioned that where a new Tax Credit claim should be possible, because a claimant has been receiving the SDP, some claimants are being told by the HMRC that they are not taking any new claims. This only seems to be resolved through the HMRC helpline if an adviser rings with the claimant present. This is not an acceptable situation.	
8.2	Len introduced Anita Dutt who is producing the documentary on local activism. Anita thanked everybody for allowing the filming of part of the meeting.	
9	Date of next meeting	
	10.00am on Thursday 12th March 2020 . Len to book Bunyan Meeting again in Bedford.	LS