

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK MINUTES OF MEETING

Thursday 5th March 2015
Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

Elliott Stephenson	Aragon Housing Association (Chair)
Karen Banfield	Leighton Linslade CAB
Jon Clingan	Carers in Bedfordshire
Liz Coulson	Mid Beds CAB
Lynn Dacey	One Support / Probation Service
Debbie Harris	Central Bedfordshire Council
Pauline Henningel	Mid Beds CAB
James Hurd	Bedford Borough Council
Jane Jenkins	Luton CAB
Purva Joshi	Advice, Training and Advocacy CIC
Bryden Keenan	BRASS
Conrad Liburd	One Support
Julie Luckman	Central Bedfordshire Council
Chris Martin	Mid Beds CAB
Sylvia McDowell	Money Advice at St Andrews
Duncan Mellonie	Bedford Borough Council – Youth Accommodation Support
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Self-Help Group
Joe Richardson	JobcentrePlus, DWP
Annette Pacey	BPHA
Jenny Pulling	Mid Beds CAB
Bhavani Sarma	Disability Resource Centre
James Snelling	JobcentrePlus, DWP
Philip Steer	Mid Beds CAB
Liz Coulson	Mid Beds CAB
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain (Minutes)

Apologies

Karen Armstrong	Luton Law Centre
Lila Begum	Advice, Training and Advocacy CIC
Dean Crofts	Bedford CAB
Noor D'Agostino	Aldwyck Housing Group
Yasmina Mahmood	Bedford Borough Council
Tina Sullivan	MacMillan Welfare Rights

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of



In partnership with



Item	Subject	Action
1	Introductions and apologies	
	Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting. Introductions were made and apologies for absence were noted.	
2	Minutes of last meeting (25th September 2014)	
	The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. There were no matters arising.	
3	Universal Credit in Bedford Borough	
	<p>James Snelling (DWP) gave a presentation on Universal Credit following its launch, for some new claimants, in Bedford Borough on 2nd March. The presentation is attached.</p> <p>Further information on UC and a partner toolkit is available on https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit-toolkit-for-partner-organisations</p> <p>Videos on UC are also available from the National Housing Federation. https://www.housing.org.uk/policy/welfare-reform/universal-credit/universal-credit/</p> <p>James reported that only two UC claims had been received in Bedford so far, since the launch on Monday.</p> <p>Various questions were put to James.</p> <p>Q. Is the IT system for dealing with UC claims ready and robust? A. Yes. There had been no problems yet. But they are only dealing with simple situations.</p> <p>Q. Is the claimant commitment really 36 hours a week? A. Yes. Unemployed claimants are expected to be actively seeking work on a full-time basis.</p> <p>Q. What help is there for claimants with budgeting difficulties? A. Claimants can be referred to Bedford CAB for up to 6 hours support. Direct payments to a landlord can be set up if a claimant is two months in arrears with their rent.</p> <p>Q. What links are there with Bedford Borough Council? A. The DWP and BBC have a Partnership Agreement. BBC will provide advice and support to the DWP on issues previously covered by Housing Benefit eg service charges, houses of multiple occupation etc. Some funding has also been given to BBC to provide support for claimants who have budgeting problems. This money has been allocated by BBC to Bedford CAB.</p> <p>Q. Do claimants need to request an Alternative Payment Arrangement? A. Yes. However, the need for an APA should be highlighted during the claim procedure. An interview at the JCP is arranged 3 days after a UC claim is made. A request for an APA needs to be made within the first 21 days of a claim for an early first payment of UC to be made.</p>	

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	<p>Q. Claims need to be made online. Where can claimants access computers?</p> <p>A. JCP offices will all have computers. Bryden Keenan reported that BRASS has a benefits specialist and can offer IT access and support to their clients. Sheila Stubbins reported that Money Advice at St Andrews also hope to provide IT support in the future.</p> <p>Q. Many claimants now receive details of their finances (eg bank statements) on their mobile phones rather than paper copies. Can this be accepted as evidence?</p> <p>A. James will check on this.</p> <p>Q. How will UC be paid?</p> <p>A. Claimants are expected to have some form of account to receive payments eg bank account, Post Office card account, credit union account. They will be referred to Bedford CAB if they need budgeting support including help to set up an account.</p> <p>Q. What training have the JCP staff received on UC?</p> <p>A. Initially there was 2 weeks of training plus pre-learning and shadowing. Further training has been received on the claimant commitment system.</p> <p>Q. If a claimant applies for HB and then later applies for UC what will happen?</p> <p>A. JCP will inform BBC. Housing costs will be included in the UC claim. HB should stop after UC claim.</p> <p>Q. Will housing associations be informed by JCP if an Alternative Payment Arrangement is agreed?</p> <p>A. JCP can only talk directly with a housing association if the claimant gives their consent.</p> <p>Q. There is not a save facility in the online claim process. Is there a list of information that a claimant needs to have ready before they start an online claim?</p> <p>A. There is no list but there is a client preparation tool on the website.</p> <p>Q. Will EEA nationals claim UC?</p> <p>A. No, not at the moment. EEA nationals are currently excluded.</p> <p>Q. Will claimants stay on UC if they move out of the area?</p> <p>A. Yes. Claimants will stay on UC if there are any changes of circumstance, as long as they meet the UC entitlement conditions.</p> <p>Q. If a UC claim is made, can it be withdrawn if the person should have claimed a different benefit eg ESA or Carer's Allowance?</p> <p>A. James will check on this.</p> <p>Q. Will JCP be communicating electronically with other DWP sections, HMRC and local authorities?</p> <p>A. Yes, at certain levels, but not fully yet.</p> <p>Q. What happens when a person comes off UC?</p> <p>A. The UC claim will lie dormant for 6 months. The claim can be re-started easily within the 6 months, if the person becomes entitled again.</p>	<p>JS</p> <p>JS</p>

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	<p>Q. Is there a direct contact or escalation number to discuss UC issues at the JCP</p> <p>A. No, not yet. However, individual work coaches could be contacted to discuss a client's situation if a claimant gives consent.</p>	
4	Personal Independence Payment	
	<p>Attendees at the meeting gave an update on PIP claims and delays. Key issues reported were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were still long delays (eg 8 months and over) with some claims, although some claims were now being dealt with a lot quicker. • Some medical assessment interviews were being cancelled at short notice • Some local clients were having to travel long distances to the medical assessments eg to Milton Keynes and even to London. • The Benefits Network had written to local MPs about providing support for claimants with PIP delays (see minutes of previous meeting). Attendees confirmed that support had given to local claimants from MPs in both Bedfordshire and Luton – including from Andrew Selous who had not replied to the letter. 	
5	Update on other Welfare Reform issues	
5.1	<p>Universal Credit in Central Bedfordshire</p> <p>UC should be launched in Central Beds. and in Luton sometime between December 2015 and April 2016.</p> <p>Various comments were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The DWP were organising a briefing for CB agencies at Aldwyck Housing Association on 13th March. • The DWP contract to administer UC will be reviewed in 2017. • Mid Beds CAB are going through refresher training on UC. • Len reported that BAF will be running two information sessions on UC for Bedford agencies on 20th March. These could possibly be run in Central Bedfordshire later in the year. • The CBC Welfare Reform Board will be discussing the impact of UC in Central Beds. • Different agencies could possibly offer budgeting support in Central Beds. eg Aragon Housing Association, CABx. • DWP will have a Partnership Agreement with CBC. These agreements with local authorities will be reviewed next year. 	

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5.2	<p>Housing Benefit (under-occupation)</p> <p>Julie Luckman (CBC) reported on the Upper Tribunal decision ([2014] UKUT 0525 (AAC)): <i>SSWP v David Nelson and Fife Council</i>) which clarified the definition of a bedroom for “under occupation” (“bedroom tax”) purposes. The tribunal found that the size of the room is not the deciding factor in itself. However, the size is one of a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration.</p> <p>Julie confirmed that there were about 1,000 HB claims affected by the under occupation rules in the social housing sector in Central Bedfordshire.</p> <p>James Hurd (BBC) reported that there about 750 claims affected in Bedford Borough – but the number was going down.</p> <p>In the private housing sector, the Local Housing Allowance rates would be going up in April. For example, the 2 bedroom rate would be going up by 4% to £133 a week.</p> <p>There was some discussion about Discretionary Housing Payments. James reported that for Bedford Borough there would be a 25% reduction in the Government grant from DHPs in 2015/16.</p>	
5.3	<p>Council Tax Support</p> <p>James reported that there had been no recent changes in Bedford Borough.</p> <p>Julie reported that in Central Bedfordshire the allowances and premiums used in the Council Tax Support calculations will be aligned to the rates used in the Housing Benefit calculations from April.</p> <p>It was confirmed that Council Tax Support will not be part of Universal Credit and separate claims will need to be made.</p>	
5.4	<p>Local Welfare Provision</p> <p>The Government had agreed to continue providing some funding for LWP schemes in 2015/16, but at a reduced rate.</p> <p>There was some concern amongst attendees at the difficulty in making applications and the lack of publicity about the local schemes. For example, there did not seem to be any leaflets on the schemes – although there is some publicity on the council websites.</p>	
5.5	<p>Benefits cap</p> <p>James (BBC) confirmed that 55 families were affected by the benefit cap in Bedford Borough.</p> <p>Julie (CBC) had confirmed that 38 families were affected in Central Bedfordshire.</p>	

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6	General updates from the local benefit offices	
6.1	<p>Jobcentre Plus / DWP</p> <p>Annette Pacey asked about calls being returned by the Benefits Service Centre. They seemed to want to return calls within 3 hours even when it was not convenient to receive the call. Is it linked to a performance target? James Snelling confirmed that there was a 3 hour target for returning calls. Annette felt a more common sense approach should be used and calls should be returned when it is convenient for advisers.</p> <p>The next CRG meeting is on 12th March. Elliott Stephenson (Aragon HA) asked if there were any issues that should be raised. The following were raised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some claimants had received incorrect forms (ESA instead of ESA 50) when reporting a change in a medical condition for ESA. • Correspondence to a claimant had gone to a previous address – even though they had reported the change of address and recent correspondence had gone to the correct address. • There seemed to be an unreasonable lack of flexibility in dealing with issues concerning the JSA actively seeking work test and the claimant commitment. <p>Other news from JCP was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computers will be available at all JCP offices soon. • National Apprenticeship Week will start on 13th March. 	
6.2	<p>Housing Benefit Offices</p> <p>Central Bedfordshire Council hope to introduce online claim forms for HB.</p>	
7	Information Exchange	
7.1	BRASS – Bryden reported that BRASS were particularly concerned about the Government's recent "Illegal Immigrant" campaign.	
7.2	Mid Beds CAB – The bureau's new debt advice service is now open.	
7.3	Bedfordshire Advice Forum – BAF's Advice Skills training programme starts on 11 th March. Universal Credit information sessions are being held on 20 th March at the CVS. BAF's advice services volunteering campaign in Central Bedfordshire is running through February and March.	
8	Any other business	
	None	
9	Date of next meeting	
	Set for 10.00am on Wednesday 16th September 2015 . Venue to be confirmed.	