

# BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

## MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021

Online Skype meeting

### Present

Elliott Stephenson	BAF / Grand Union Housing Group - <b>Chair</b>
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain – <b>Facilitator</b>
Wendy Swain	Infotrain - <b>Minutes</b>
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Donna Bradshaw	Hightown Housing Association
Karina Chamberlain	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Luton
Sam Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Wendy Jephcote	Social Prescribing - Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Renata Kania	Money Advice Team - BPHA
Lisa King	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Carol Madden	Money Advice at St Andrews
Yasmina Mahmood	Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council
Julie May	Citizens Advice Mid Beds
Frank Martorelli	DWP
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Self-Help Group
JP Smith	Hightown Housing Association
Martin Trinder	CVS Bedfordshire
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Terriane Wilcox	Citizens Advice Bedford
Briony White	Customer Finance - Central Bedfordshire Council
Benjamin ?	One Support

### Apologies

Neelam Chandar	One Housing
James Hurd	Revenues and Benefits - Bedford Borough Council
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Bedford
Julie Luckman	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
Bonita Murphy	DWP
Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire  
Advice Forum

In partnership with



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<b>Item</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Welcome to the online meeting</b>	
	Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting.	
<b>2</b>	<b>Introductions and apologies</b>	
	Introductions were made and apologies for absence taken.	
<b>3</b>	<b>Minutes of last meeting (24<sup>th</sup> September 2020)</b>	
	<p>The minutes were agreed as correct. There were no matters arising.</p> <p>A further BBN meeting had initially been planned for 10<sup>th</sup> December because the Government's furlough scheme was due to stop at the end of November, and new benefit announcements were expected. However, the furlough scheme had been extended until 2021, and so there was no need for the BBN meeting in December.</p>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Covid-19 crisis – General update since last meeting</b>	
	<p>A short benefit update had been distributed in December instead of the planned BBN meeting. Elliott asked if there were any questions about the update. There were no questions or comments.</p> <p>Elliott had prepared a presentation covering the more recent Covid-19 benefit changes, and some other, general benefit changes. Elliott was also able to add some key announcements that had been issued by the Chancellor this morning in advance of today's Budget.</p> <p><b><u>Covid-19 benefit changes</u></b></p> <p>The key points presented were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Universal Credit</b> - £20 a week uplift was due to end in April but has now been extended to September 2021. Suspension of Minimum Income Floor rule (for self-employed claimants) was due to end in April but this may also be extended.</li> <li>• <b>Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme</b> – Was due to end in April but has now been extended until September 2021. This means that the predicted increase in unemployment (and benefit claims) expected in April, would now be postponed to September.</li> <li>• <b>Self-Employment Income Support</b> – It has been announced that 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grants will be available later in 2021.</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Covid Winter Grant Scheme</b> – This funding was being used by the local councils to top-up internal budgets (eg Local Welfare Provision) to help vulnerable people.  Renata (BPHA) reported that in Bedford Borough some of the funding is administered by British Red Cross. Renata will send through details of this, for Len to distribute to BBN members.</li> <li>• <b>Self-Isolation Grant</b> – Julie (CBC) had sent an update that the grant was being extended until 30/6/21. There were reports of problems accessing these grants.  Donna (Hightown HA) shared some difficulties that her clients had experienced in claiming the grant. Benjamin (One Support) said that only 33% of people who applied had received it across the country.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Non Covid-19 benefit changes</u></b></p> <p>Elliott gave updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Severe Disability Premium</b> – including: Gateway rules; and Transitional Element in UC.  Karen (CALL) asked whether the Transitional Element was protected if UC stops because of earnings. Elliott confirmed that if entitlement to UC ends because of the earnings level, the TE can be re-instated if the claimant becomes entitled to UC again within 3 months.</li> <li>• <b>Further changes to UC</b> – including: Pay Day Shift regulations; rent issues; managed migration; and Childcare Costs Element  Elliott stated that a court had ruled that it was unlawful for someone to be expected to pay childcare costs upfront to be able to get help with the costs through UC. This ruling may be challenged. However, there is also a separate fund that that can be accessed, from the DWP, to help with initial childcare costs.</li> <li>• <b>Other benefit news</b> – including updates on: PIP; Tax Credits; Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support  Julie (CBC) had sent information about the cut in the personal allowances, from April, for some pensioners on HB and CTS. This change will align the HB/CTS personal allowances to the Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit) rates.</li> </ul> <p>Len will distribute Elliott’s presentation slides after the meeting. The news from today’s Budget will be added to the presentation.</p>	<p>RK / LS</p> <p>LS</p>
<p>5</p>	<p><b>Other benefit issues and updates</b></p>	
	<p>Already covered in Item 4</p>	

6	<b>Updates from the local benefit offices</b>	
6.1	<p><b>DWP</b></p> <p>Frank gave an update on local job recruitment (and sent further details by email).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Open Reach</b> are planning to recruit up to 700 people into new civil engineering roles nationally by the end of 2021. DWP will be working closely with them to fill any roles across Bedfordshire, which they expect to be in the low hundreds.</li> <li>• <b>Red Light Network Ltd</b> (Open Reach sub-contractors) have been awarded a 2 year contract to deliver fibre optic installation across Bedford Borough and Northants and are seeking local labour.</li> <li>• <b>B&amp;M</b> are currently using the DWP's Employer Suite to carry out interviews for their warehouse etc.</li> <li>• <b>AF Blakemore</b> are also interviewing for their warehouse on Manton Heights</li> <li>• <b>Construction Skills Certification Scheme</b> training will start again at Bedford College on 8<sup>th</sup> March.</li> </ul> <p>Also DWP itself is recruiting more staff. There are possibilities of increasing their office space to support increased claimant volumes. The Bedford Office has acquired a new site in addition to its current site on Bromham Road. The new premises will be on Manton Lane and will be a pop-up Jobcentre. The new site can cater for around 60 staff, but drop-ins will not be possible, and appointments will need to be made.</p>	
6.2	<p><b>Bedford Borough Council</b></p> <p>James had sent some information in his absence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There will be no major changes to the Borough's <b>Council Tax Reduction Scheme</b> from April. The scheme is based on 100% of the CT charged, with a capital limit of £8,000, and no award is made if a non-dependant's income is over £350 a week.</li> <li>• A <b>new online system</b> is being launched on 15<sup>th</sup> March. Claims can be made online, without needing to log-in, and evidence can be uploaded to the website.</li> </ul>	
6.3	<p><b>Central Bedfordshire Council</b></p> <p>Julie had sent some information in her absence.</p> <p><b>Workloads</b> - Work is fairly up-to-date. However, workloads are expected to increase when Council Tax bills and letters are issued for the new financial year. The additional £150 paid in CTS awards in 2020/21 is being withdrawn from April.</p>	

	<p><b>Council Tax Support</b> – The CTS caseload has increased by about 7% compared to the same time last year. About 30% of CTS claimants are people of working age receiving Universal Credit, about 32% are of working age but not receiving UC; and the rest (38%) are pensioners.</p> <p><b>Discretionary Housing Payments</b> - The DHP budget for 2021/22 has not been confirmed yet. There is still some of the budget left for the current year, but applications need to be made, and processed, by the end of March. If a payment is made after 31/3/21, it will have to come out of the 2021/22 budget.</p>	
<b>7</b>	<b>Information Exchange</b>	
	<p><b>Grand Union Housing Group</b></p> <p>Elliott stated that advice has continued to be given via email or over the phone. Some extremely vulnerable people have been seen at home. When Step 3 of the Government’s road map is reached (indoor mixing rule of 6), advisors will do more home visits. In the pandemic Grand Union has learnt there are some things that can be done without a face-to-face visit. This will help make the service more efficient and they hope to be able to help more people in future.</p> <p><b>Money Advice at St Andrews</b></p> <p>Carol stated since last September they had lost 3 experienced advisers which has caused some difficulties. They had appointed some new advisers but 1 has now left. Advisers have also taken on a new, client support role to try to reduce the workload. It has been difficult working with clients on the phone or by email so they are now only using Zoom, as this has worked well. During the pandemic there had been a steady stream of clients but this has recently slowed down.</p> <p><b>Macmillan Welfare Rights Service - Luton</b></p> <p>Karina stated their services are likely to operate differently post-Covid compared to pre-Covid. During the pandemic staff have been working from home, whereas before they would have been at surgeries at the hospital or in clinics. Although telephone contact does have some issues, it has been found that not all clients need to be seen to get the necessary information. Video consultations have been arranged for those who can manage them. The workload is still very busy.</p> <p>Elliott added Grand Union have introduced a digital signing service which has helped considerably in obtaining documents.</p> <p><b>Money Advice Team - BPHA</b></p> <p>Renata stated that advisers are continuing to work from home, making contact with clients by phone. There have also been some doorstep visits to collect paperwork from clients.</p>	

**Hightown Housing Association**

JP stated they are very busy – especially with DHP applications. Councils in Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire reportedly still have lots of money left in their DHP budgets. JP added that they are seeing more and more people having to move properties, as they can no longer afford the rent.

**Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire**

Julie stated that advisers have been home working throughout the pandemic. Queries are received by telephone or via the website, and this has worked well, although they may have missed some of the more vulnerable who used to pop into the offices. They are anticipating returning to the offices around the end of April or early May. They are still very busy but things are going well.

**Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade**

Karen updated they have remained open for staff and volunteers but for restricted numbers. Clients have been seen at the door, with social distancing being adhered to, in order to collect documents. More work has been completed over the phone than before such as PIP forms. Although face-to-face advice is better, this new system has worked well and will continue in future. Debt work has been extremely busy in the past but has slowed down over the past year. A big increase in debt enquiries is expected when the Government's job protection scheme is withdrawn.

**Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity**

Lisa stated she is still waiting for some training in debt advice. Elliott suggested Wiseraadviser for debt advice training.

**Carers in Bedfordshire**

Philippa stated that carers have found the isolation during the pandemic very hard, particularly parent carers. Debt and benefit advice have taken second place, as dealing with the isolation has been the main issue.

**Citizens Advice Bedford**

Terrienne stated that CAB is still working remotely. They are very busy with welfare benefits. There was a big lull in PIP enquiries at the end of 2020, but these are now increasing. There has also been an increase in Right to Reside enquiries, due to the June deadline, and this is causing issues. There have also been increased referrals to the Money Advice team from the Welfare Benefits team. When the office re-opens it is expected to be for 3 days a week, with advice given by appointment only.

Karina added that the DWP suspended all PIP reviews and the need for renewal applications last year. The suspension was lifted on 1<sup>st</sup> January, which has resulted in increased claims.

	<p><b>Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – CBC</b></p> <p>Sam updated they are still offering phone appointments only. All the staff have received their vaccines. Once they have been given the go ahead from the hospitals, they will be offering a limited face-to-face service for vulnerable clients. People have been using the Job Retention Scheme so many clients are getting more money than they would if having to claim SSP or ESA. However, in September, Sam expects the service will be really busy when the CJRS stops.</p>	
<b>8</b>	<b>BAF training</b>	
	<p>Len updated that BAF had secured some funding from the Harpur Trust in Bedford to help develop some <b>online training on Universal Credit</b>. Elliott and Len ran 2 programmes on UC earlier in the year. BAF's normal, full day UC course was split into 4 sessions to make it more manageable online. Due to the high demand for the initial, January programme, another course was arranged for February. The courses were aimed at new advisers or those who wanted a refresher. In total 32 people attended the training programmes. There were a few IT issues with the new, online training but generally feedback was very positive.</p> <p>There are also many workers who need some information on UC but do not need the in-depth knowledge provided by the full UC programme. Elliott and Len are therefore now preparing a short <b>Overview of UC</b> course aimed at community workers, which will only last 1.5 hours. Further funding from the Harpur Trust has been obtained for this work. This course will be ready in May. Initially the training will only be for agencies working in Bedford Borough but, hopefully, it can be offered in Central Beds later.</p>	
<b>9</b>	<b>Any other business</b>	
9.1	Karen (CALL) reminded members to encourage their EU clients, who are eligible, to register for the <b>Right to Reside</b> by the end of June.	
9.2	Len added that the <b>Benefits Network</b> meetings are always well attended – 20 people were present today. BAF's Steering Group will be meeting shortly, and Len and Elliott will recommend that BAF continues to provide the Network meetings in 2021/22.	LS / ES
<b>10</b>	<b>Date of next meeting</b>	
	TBA in September 2021. Len will email members with the date.	LS