

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

MINUTES OF MEETING

10.00 am, Wednesday 9th March 2016

Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford

Present

Elliott Stephenson	Aragon Housing Association (Chair)
Karen Banfield	Leighton Linslade CAB
Lila Begum	SAWR
Jon Clingan	Carers in Bedfordshire
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service, CBC
Mandina Conta	One Support / Student Social Worker
Noor D'Agostino	Aldwyck Housing Group
Lynn Dacey	One Support / Probation
Jenny Harris	Carers in Bedfordshire
Omolara Lamal	Luton Community Housing
Julie Luckman	Central Bedfordshire Council
Cathy Moorhouse	BRASS
Iwona Nowakowska	Building Blocks Children's Centre
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice Mid Beds
Bhavani Sarma	Disability Resource Centre
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Jason Tsiricos	PBIC
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire
Helen Wilkie	Money Advice at St Andrews
Len Simkins	BAF / Infotrain (Facilitator and minutes)

Apologies

Gareth Evans	Places for People
James Hurd	Bedford Borough Council
Bryden Keenan	BRASS
Yasmina Mahmood	Bedford Borough Council
Duncan Mellonie	Bedford Borough Council – Youth Accommodation Support
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Self-Help Group
Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Sheila Stubbins	Money Advice at St Andrews
Sue Warner	Citizens Advice Mid Beds

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of



In partnership with



Item	Subject	Action
1	Benefits and EEA Nationals	
	<p>This item had been put at the beginning of the meeting because the presenter (Jason Tsiricos) had to leave for another meeting at 10.30.</p> <p>Jason gave an overview of the benefits available for EEA nationals and explained the key issues surrounding entitlement. Len will email a copy of Jason's presentation after the meeting.</p> <p>Various questions were put to Jason including:</p> <p>Q. Does the 3 month residence test for JSA still apply even if a person was claiming a similar benefit in their own country? A. Yes.</p> <p>Q. Is the 5 year test of permanent residence met simply by living in the UK? A. Yes. But any gaps in the residence can cause problems.</p> <p>Q. Is Child Benefit included in the "benefit handbrake" that is part of the UK's future agreement with the EU, if the UK remains in the EU? A. Yes. If the emergency handbrake is used, it is proposed that new EEA migrants would need to wait 4 years before they can claim in-work benefits – including CB.</p> <p>Q. What is the position regarding children and benefits? A. A right to reside is normally needed to access help. But support can sometimes be provided in other circumstances. There is some good information about the Children Act produced by the Public Law Project. Jason will circulate this. He will also circulate a paper on "Kapow to the Gpow" looking at the Genuine Prospect of Work Test.</p> <p>Q. What happens if a couple splits up and the jobseeker leaves the household? A. The partner (if married) still has worker status as a family member. HMRC will make enquiries to verify that the ex-partner is still a jobseeker or worker.</p> <p>Jason was thanked for his very informative presentation. Len suggested that it would be good if Jason could provide a longer training session (eg ½ day course) on the subject in the future. Len will send an email out to check on demand and will discuss this with BAF's Steering Group.</p>	<p>LS</p> <p>JT</p> <p>LS</p>
2	Introductions and apologies	
	<p>Elliott Stephenson (Chair) welcomed everybody to the meeting. There was another good attendance for this meeting today.</p> <p>Introductions were made. Apologies for absence had been given by a number of people. Len will email the list after the meeting.</p>	LS

3	Minutes of last meeting (16th September 2016) and matters arising	
	<p>A correction was made to the minutes. Item 5.1 (Personal Independence Payment) – 6th paragraph. The example given in the last sentence referred to an assessment of visual impairment not a PIP assessment.</p> <p>The minutes of the last meeting were then agreed.</p> <p>Matters arising were:</p> <p>Item 2 – Matters arising - Mobile phone evidence</p> <p>Len reported that new HB guidance states that documents on a mobile phone can now be accepted as evidence. Julie clarified that claimants still need to provide original documents to prove their ID at the start of a claim, but other supporting documents can be provided on a mobile phone, as long as the evidence can be verified.</p> <p>Item 4 – Carers and the Benefits Cap</p> <p>The Government has recently announced that carers will be exempt from the cap.</p> <p>Item 5 – PIP – Out of area PIP assessments</p> <p>Bhavani reported that some claimants were still being given PIP assessments away from their local area. She had written to the local MP (Andrew Selous) about this</p> <p>Item 5 – PIP – People with visual impairments</p> <p>Mark Chapman (Sight Concern) had sent a comment, after receiving the minutes of the last meeting, saying that he was having good results at PIP appeals for people with sight problems.</p>	
4	Universal Credit	
	<p>UC had been launched in Central Bedfordshire on 22nd February for new claims from single, unemployed people.</p> <p>It is anticipated that only a small number of UC claims will be made each week. Elliot noted that there had been no confirmed claims of UC by Aragon tenants. Karen said that they had dealt with 1 UC claimant at Leighton Linlade CAB.</p> <p>Julie estimated that there may be a reduction of about 200-300 claims for Housing Benefit over the year as a result of new, single, unemployed claimants claiming UC instead of HB.</p> <p>Julie responded to a couple of queries about claims for Council Tax Support (CTS) from UC claimants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New UC claimants would not need to re-claim CTS if they were already receiving CTS before the UC claim. • There was not a separate claim form for CTS and claims are made using the HB claim form. A new online process had been introduced in Central Beds but UC claimants cannot use this and will need to submit a written claim form for CTS. 	

	<p>Len reported on feedback from Bedford CAB that some new UC claimants in Bedford Borough had got into problems with Council Tax arrears because they were unaware they had to submit a separate claim for CTS.</p> <p>Citizens Advice had been awarded the contract to provide budgeting support to new UC claimants in Central Bedfordshire. CB claimants who sign on at Leighton Buzzard Jobcentre area will be referred to Leighton Linslade CAB; CB claimants who sign on at Luton Jobcentre will be referred to Dunstable CAB; and CB claimants who sign on at the Biggleswade Jobcentre will be referred to Mid Beds CAB.</p> <p>CBC Customer Services can provide some support with online claiming. Aragon HA can also provide some IT support. CBC Library Service can provide some free internet time.</p> <p>Noor reported that Aldwyck Housing Group provide support to tenants in many local areas, and were already helping UC claimants in different areas. Alternative Payment Arrangements had successfully been set up, for direct payment of rent to Aldwyck, where tenants were in rent arrears.</p> <p>An example was given of a person with mental health problems who had been discharged from hospital. He mistakenly claimed UC rather than ESA but now was not able to withdraw the UC claim.</p> <p>An Advance Payment of UC can be paid to claimants during the assessment period if a claimant is in financial need, but claims should be made before the last 3 days of the assessment month. This payment is a loan and deductions will be automatically made from later UC payments to repay the advance. The DWP will normally try to use the higher repayment rate (40% of the UC standard allowance) but this can be challenged.</p> <p>The timetable for the full, digital rollout of UC has been announced. This will apply to all new claims from all claimants. The rollout will be done slowly in stages. None of our local areas are included in the rollout in 2016.</p>	
<p>5</p>	<p>Disability benefits</p>	
<p>5.1</p>	<p>Update on Personal Independence Payment</p> <p>A number of comments were made. Many were positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The general feedback from those present was that the claiming process for PIP was now a lot quicker. • Aragon HA are now attending some PIP assessments with tenants • The re-assessment of DLA claims was now moving ahead steadily • Mandatory considerations are being undertaken very quickly • There is a good success rate at appeals • Autism Bedfordshire support people across the autism spectrum. Some users had to appeal against PIP decisions. AB's trainers and tutors had successfully provided supporting evidence for some users. 	

	<p>However, there were also some worrying issues raised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some centres used for PIP assessments had access problems. Benefits and Work are collecting feedback on this. For example, public transport access is poor for the Milton Keynes centre. And at Dunstable there is a lack of parking at the centre. • Carers in Bedfordshire had a client with Aspergers Syndrome who was being re-assessed for PIP, and had been awarded zero points. A complaint was submitted following the assessment. An appeal was also submitted and the client was awarded PIP. • A client with schizophrenia was awarded zero points. It was suggested that a complaint should be made about this case as well as appealing against the decision. • In another case, a call was made to a doctor's receptionist to gather information about a DS500 (terminal illness) claim. <p>5.2 Proposals for changes to Attendance Allowance</p> <p>Recent Government consultation on local government finance had included a suggestion that Attendance Allowance could be abolished and that financial support for older people with care needs could be paid by local authorities instead. There is an online petition opposing this.</p>	
6	Update on other Welfare Reform Issues	
<p>6.1</p> <p>6.2</p> <p>6.3</p>	<p>Housing Benefit (Under-occupancy)</p> <p>Elliott reported that 326 Aragon tenants were affected by the "Bedroom Tax". Some tenants were also affected by the Benefit Cap.</p> <p>Julie reported that 900+ tenants were affected by the "Bedroom Tax" in Central Beds. CBC had spent almost all of its Discretionary Housing Payment allocation or 2015/16. However, payments can be extended over the financial year</p> <p>Council Tax Support</p> <p>Julie reported that will not be any changes to the CTS rules in Central Beds in 2016/17.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Family Premium will be retained in the calculation. • 6 months backdating will still be available for CTS <p>Local Welfare Provision</p> <p>LWP will continue to be provided in 2016/17 in Central Beds. CBC are using Tesco vouchers as payments. A mobile code is sent for use on pre-payment meters.</p> <p>Further information on LWP can be obtained from Justine Morris at CBC.</p>	

6.4	Benefit Cap A reduction in the Benefit Cap to £20,000 a year will be phased in from the autumn. CBC will begin notifying customers in the spring. There will also be a limit on new benefit claims from families with more than two children from 2017.	
7	General updates from the local benefit offices	
7.1	Jobcentre Plus / DWP Nobody has attended from the DWP for a few meetings despite their assurance last year that a representative would regularly attend. The next DWP CRG meeting is tomorrow in St Albans. Some network members will be attending.	
7.2	Housing Benefit Offices CBC has increased their speed in processing new claims. CBC will accept authorisations for payments to landlords by email.	
8	Information exchange	
8.1	Macmillan Welfare Rights Samantha reported that Tina O'Sullivan had moved onto a more senior role in Macmillan. She also reported that Macmillan has an adviser vacancy in their Peterborough office.	
8.2	Aldwyck Housing Group Noor reported that Aldwyck give benefits advice to all new tenants. This can help to sustain tenancies in the long-run.	
9	Any other business	
9.1	Karen reported on a Tax Credit claim with very long delays.	
9.2	Jenny asked if BAF were planning to run an Introduction to Benefits course. Len replied that nothing was planned at the moment by the BAF Steering Group could look at this. He will send an email to network members to gauge interest.	LS
9.3	Bhavani recommended that advisers use the DWP Escalation list. There were some very helpful new managers.	
10	Date of next meeting	
	10.00 am on Wednesday 21 st September 2016. (NB Now has now changed to 10.00am on Wednesday 28th September) Venue to be confirmed. We will try to book the same venue again.	