

MINUTES OF BENEFITS NETWORK MEETING

Monday 3rd October 2011 at 2:00pm

Wingfield Court (Aragon Housing Association), Neotsbury Road, Ampthill, MK45 2TE

Present

Anne-Michelle Collins – Aragon Housing Association (Acting Chair)
Judith Reed - Aragon Housing Association (Minutes)
Dean Crofts – Bedford CAB
Len Simkins – Bedfordshire Advice Forum
Lila Begum - Bedfordshire Race & Equalities Council
Purva Joshi – Bedfordshire Race & Equalities Council
Bryden Keenan – Bedfordshire Refugee & Asylum Seeker Support
Bhavani Sarma – Disability Resource Centre
Judith Blackwell – Jephson HA
Sharon Potter – Jephson HA
Gill Mason – Jobcentre Plus
Joe Richardson – Jobcentre Plus
Pat Horn – Mature Citizens Action Group
David Waggott – Mid Bedfordshire CAB
Sue Warner – Mid Bedfordshire CAB
Alison Caves – One Support Bedford
Jill Withey – One Support Bedford
Robert Brady – Polish British Integration Centre
Albert Braminskfi - Polish British Integration Centre
Iwona Nowakowska – Polish British Integration Centre
Jon Clingan – Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Jenny Harris – Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Philippa Ward – Sight Concern Bedfordshire

Apologies

Michele Collins – Aragon Housing Association (Chair)
Noor D'Agostino – Bedford Borough Council
Debbie Hammond – Bedford Borough Council
James Hurd – Bedford Borough Council
Annette Pacey – BPHA
Amanda Ryan - BPHA
Cheryl Subocz – Carers in Bedfordshire
Julie Luckman – Central Bedfordshire Council
Jane Foster – Embrace Life (Luton Community Housing)
Louise Peck-Cooper – Jobcentre Plus
Karen Banfield – Leighton Linlade CAB
Cara Passfield – Mayday Trust
Glenda Clark – MacMillan Welfare Rights
Mary Allen – Pension Service

<p>1.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>3.</p> <p>4.</p>	<p>Introductions and Apologies</p> <p>Anne-Michelle Collins welcomed everybody to the 2nd meeting of the new network. Attendees introduced themselves.</p> <p>Len Simkins read the list of apologies. There was obviously a strong interest in the network with over 20 attendees and 14 apologies.</p> <p>Minutes of last meeting (14th March 2011) and matters arising</p> <p>Item 6 - Len had circulated the escalation lists from Jobcentre Plus for their Watford and Luton offices.</p> <p>No other issues arising from previous minutes.</p> <p>New Benefits Network</p> <p>Len summarised the background to the new network which had replaced the old BRIEF network which had ceased in 2009. The first pilot meeting had been held in March. This was the second pilot meeting. BAF will review the success of the two pilots.</p> <p>Some people had requested some meetings to be held in Bedford. However, attendees today were happy with Ampthill. AMC offered the Meeting Room at Aragon HA, subject to completion of building works, for the next meeting, probably in February 2012. BAF's Steering Group will suggest on future venues if the meetings continue.</p> <p>Personal Independence Payment</p> <p>Len passed around a handout, which gave details of the plans for this new benefit.</p> <p>Personal Independence Payment (PIP) will replace DLA for disabled people under 65. The first draft of the regulations has recently been published. The second draft is due out in the Autumn. PIP should be launched in April 2013.</p> <p>There will be two parts to PIP – the “Mobility” component and the “Daily Living” component. Both parts should have a standard and an enhanced rate.</p> <p>Len explained the planned assessment process and the eligibility criteria which is based on a list of activities and a set of descriptors (with allocated points) under each activity.</p>	
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5. Other benefit changes

Len passed around a handout, which explained the following benefit changes.

- **Income Support** – lone parents will only be eligible if they have a child under 5 years. (This rule will be introduced from 9 January 2012 for new claimants. Existing claimants are now being contacted about the future changes by Jobcentre Plus)
- **Winter Fuel Payment** – basic payment reduced back to £200 (From this winter)
- **Housing Benefit** – Single people under 35 will only be eligible for the LA rate for shared accommodation. (From January 2012 for new claimants).
- **Support for mortgage interest** – End of temporary rules providing extra help. (From January 20112).
- **Contributory Employment & Support Allowance** – entitlement to be limited to one year. (From April 2012)
- **Housing Benefit** – Increased budgets for Discretionary Housing Payments (From April 2012)
- **Tax Credits** – various restrictions to entitlement eg remobvela of 50+ element. (From April 2012)
- **Benefit cheques** – New payment service, using PayPoints, will be introduced to replace benefit cheques. (From 2012. Further information will be available soon).

A useful website for further information on benefits is www.turn2us.org.uk

6. Liaison with Local Benefit Offices

(a) Jobcentre Plus

Gill Mason gave an update on various issues including:

The **Work Programme** went live in June 2011. It helps people to come off benefits. The service is being personalised. After the initial appointment, claimants will then be allocated a named advisor, who will tailor their support needs and stay with them until placed into work. All services have been digitilised. Claimants are directed to on-line services, or to a personal advisor.

Great Britain Working – This is an overall package of support to the customers, until they get to work. It includes working & enterprise clubs, networking, meeting others, skills contacts, help and support to return to work. These services are not provided by the JobCentre Plus itself but by external providers.

Working Together – this encourages claimants to take up voluntary work to develop new skills, and to help unemployed people to find suitable opportunities.

Enterprise Allowance comes into force in August 2011, to support unemployed people to start their own business. A mentor is allocated who gives support to build a business plan etc. for 26 weeks. A low cost loan can also be applied for.

Work Experience – started in January 2011 for young people, with no work experience, aged from 18-24 yrs, or 25+ if claiming for 13 weeks. This is voluntary, but once agreed and completed for one week, it become mandatory. Support can be given with travel and child care costs.

Sector based working academy – this involves working with an employer, through a college, to try to move into full time work.

Flexible support funding – this helps customers back to work, with help with travel costs, tools, and training.

Len gave out a handout showing the **new Partnership Structure** at Jobcentre Plus. The Partnership Managers can be contacted to discuss general issues at Jobcentre Plus. However, enquires about specific benefit cases should be made using the normal channels and the Escalation Lists which had been circulated recently.

(b) Pension Service

Mary Allen had been unable to attend the meeting today.

There were no specific issues raised about the Pension Service or benefits for older people.

(c) Housing Benefit Offices

James Hurd had sent through an update from **Bedford Borough Council**.

- Their case workload remains very busy.
- The DWP have introduced a new system (ATLAS) for informing the Housing Benefit Office of Tax Credit changes.
- They have identified 150 existing claims that will be affected by the changes to the LHA in January for single people. They could each lose up to £42 per week.
- HB/CTB appeals are taking a long time to be listed.

	<p>Comments included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ HB appeal hearings in Bedford are only heard on a Friday ➤ Requests are being made for full details on children's ages for HB claims in Bedford Borough, even though these details are already held by the Child Benefit Centre. This is delaying HB processing time. There seemed to be a more flexible approach taken in Central Bedfordshire. Len will look into this. <p>Julie Luckman (Central Bedfordshire Council) had sent through an update on the proposed abolition of Council Tax Benefit, and the setting up of a locally administered scheme. The consultation on the changes closes on 14 October 2011.</p> <p>7. Training needs</p> <p>BAF was planning its next training programme. Len requested details of the benefits training needs of network members. Requests were made for courses on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESA – changes • General benefits refresher course • Benefits update • Habitual residency • Update of various changes <p>If BAF can get local trainers from BAF agencies, the cost of the courses will be minimal – possibly about £20 a place. However, for more specialist courses, an external trainer would be needed and this would put the cost up to about £50 a place.</p> <p>8. Information Exchange</p> <p>BREC – Can do home visits to help with DLA and ESA claims, if clients have a language barrier. They also help with appeals but do not represent at hearings.</p> <p>Bedford CAB – Have a welfare benefit specialist. However, to receive this specialist help, clients must be eligible for legal aid. This LSC funded post is in place until October 2012.</p> <p>A question was asked about specialist support on benefits in Central Bedfordshire. Len reported that in the development work done by BAF on the Advice Strategy, it was identified that there was no specialist level benefits support in Central Bedfordshire.</p> <p>Aragon Housing Association – Can help with benefit appeals but only for their own tenants. Aragon are also organising a project called TinTastics, asking employees to supply food (eg tins, dried goods etc) each month. The food is then given to Stotfold Baptist Church to supply food parcels for those in need.</p>	<p>LS</p>
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	<p>It was also reported that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A Food Bank is going to be set up in Bedford, headed by The Salvation Army. Vouchers will be supplied to the needy, then collection points set up. Further information will be available later. ➤ Sandy Lions also do food hampers at Christmas. <p>Bedfordshire Advice Forum - Next Forum meeting is on 18th October at 2.00pm, at the Salvation Army Hall in Bedford. The agenda is going out next week.</p> <p>9. Any other business</p> <p>Future of the Benefits Network - The general view from those at the meeting was to carry on with the new Network. This will be reviewed by BAF's Steering Group. A key question is how to get funding to support the Network. A number of suggestions were made. It was hoped that another meeting could be arranged in about 6 months.</p> <p>Benefit problems - Some individual problems were addressed to the Jobcentre Plus representatives including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing number of disputes about residency test • Problems in getting through on the telephone and then being cut off • Complaints about ESA assessments <p>These issues should be raised separately with the Jobcentre – general complaints to the Partnership Managers, and disputes about specific cases to the relevant assessment sections.</p> <p>10. Date of Next Meeting</p> <p>TBA. Possibly in March 2012.</p>	
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This benefits network meeting was organised by



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