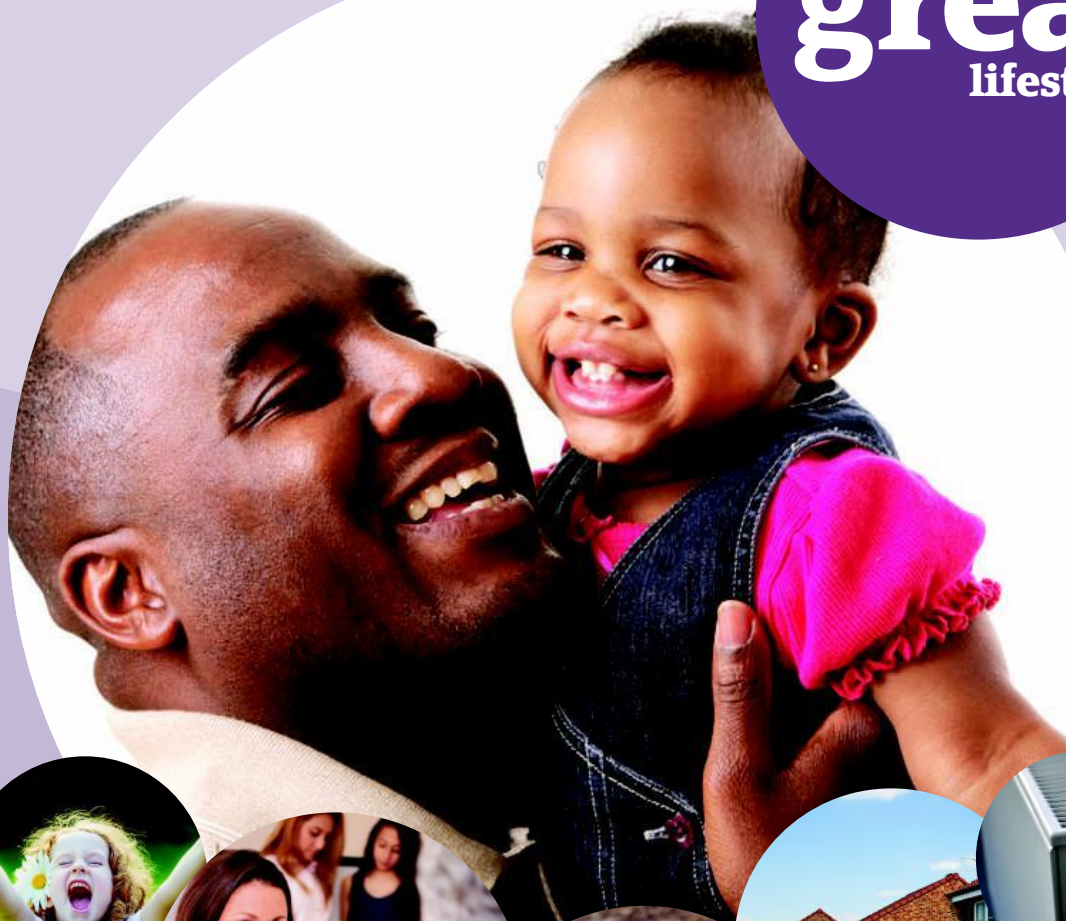


Central
Bedfordshire

great
lifestyles



Helping residents deal with welfare reform

A great place to live and work

Find us online



www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Introduction

Since 2010 there have been a number of reforms to the welfare system, both locally and nationally, with more planned over the next five years.

We, as a council, care about our residents and have worked to identify the impacts on residents as changes have started to take effect, as well as planning for the potential impact of future reforms. Our Five Year Plan includes a section on increasing the resilience of residents, due to the impact of welfare reform.

Coinciding with this period is the publication of the new national Child Poverty Strategy, building upon the original one, and giving clarity to local work around child poverty.

The impact of the reforms has reinforced the need for us to offer help to people who are impacted by the changes in a way which will give them the support and resilience needed to improve their situation, improve their mental health if needed and reduce their levels of poverty.

Whilst the welfare reforms have specifically excluded any impact on older people, this does not mean that the population of Central Bedfordshire who are over 65 are devoid of poverty. Therefore our offer includes those pensioners who receive Council Tax Support and claim Housing Benefit.

The publication of our 'Offer' brings together these pieces of work, and clearly states our ambition to:

- 1. Help people back to work, and those in low paid work to progress**
- 2. Improve housing circumstances**
- 3. Build resilience in the population of Central Bedfordshire by providing information and advice, so that residents can make informed choices and help themselves.**



1) Helping people back to work and those in low pay to progress

Work is the single biggest factor in ending poverty. Improving skill levels, providing a wide range of suitable jobs at all levels and removing barriers such as transport and childcare will assist residents of Central Bedfordshire to improve their own and their family's life chances.

Improving skill levels

- **Upskilling residents**

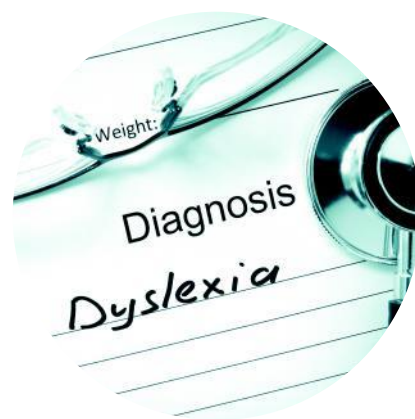
A comprehensive programme to upskill residents both improves their skills to move into better paid jobs and, for those who have been out of the workplace for some time, to move into work. This includes CV writing, interview skills, IT for work programmes, maths and english, and volunteering opportunities. Help is also given to find employment opportunities through job searching and brokerage, and provision of work clubs, along with an adult careers service. Much of this work is carried out with partners such as Job Centre Plus to avoid any duplication.

- **Providing apprenticeships**

A traineeship programme has been developed enabling participants to progress to apprenticeships. Apprenticeships have been provided by us and we have developed programmes with external partners - for example in the early years and childcare, teaching assistants, adult social care and housing sectors. Organisations working for us are being required to agree to provide apprenticeships as part of their contract.

- **Helping people with learning disabilities**

A supported employment approach has been developed to help people with learning disabilities access paid work.



We are the lead partner in the Preparing for Adulthood programme which develops a transitions pathway for young people with disabilities and includes a clear emphasis on access to paid employment, meaningful work training and accessible and relevant information on career options in adult life.

- **Offering special help to our tenants**

The Housing team provide a package of employment support for housing tenants, encouraging tenants to take up opportunities they may otherwise not access due to lack of motivation, aspiration and confidence.



Suitable jobs at all levels

- **Supporting businesses to create jobs**

A very comprehensive support package has been designed to attract new inward investment and encourage expansion opportunities for business already in the area, which in turn will aid job creation. This includes specialist visits by support officers, website and newsletters, workshops and clinics, and specialist support to micro, small and medium businesses, via our Innovation Bridge, Timebank, and My Incubator Ventures project (new business start up support). A programme of support has been developed to enhance the emerging structure of social enterprise organisations.

- **Helping where there is a risk of redundancy**

A rapid response support package is available to companies who are 'at risk' of making redundancies. This includes business support advice and guidance to employees on career opportunities.

- **Helping employers with skills gaps**

We coordinate a response to employers on identified recruitment and skills gap needs for workforce development (current and future). This includes priority sectors, existing business expansion and new business investments.

- **Helping and encouraging businesses financially**

We have a discretionary Rate Relief Policy which enables the award of rate relief to local businesses which are struggling to pay their rate liability, enabling them to continue in business. Employers are encouraged to offer local opportunities through planning obligations.



Reducing barriers to employment and training

- **Supporting people who need more help**

Specialist employment and skills provision is commissioned to support people with additional needs and barriers such as mental health, child care requirements, and second language needs. For those who are suffering from a range of mental health difficulties help is available to improve resilience and ensure that people are fit to enter the workplace. Mental health self help guides on a range of topics are also available to download from our website.

Improved health and wellbeing will also help to reduce absenteeism. A number of interventions are available to help remove these barriers, for example, addiction reduction programmes, mental health support, stop smoking and obesity reduction interventions.

- **Helping with transport**

We provide a Travel Aid bus pass for people who are seeking work. A bus pass can be purchased for £5, thereby enabling them to attend training and work interviews.

- **Ensuring sufficient childcare**

The council ensures that there is sufficient high quality, accessible childcare available for all parents who wish to work. An average of 98 per cent of all three and four year olds access their free entitlement to 15 hours childcare, and approx. 90 per cent of eligible two year olds. Extended childcare is available for parents at 83 per cent of the lower schools and 84 per cent of middle schools, and holiday provision appears to generally meet demand.

- **Helping parents find childcare**

A brokerage service is in place to help parents find suitable childcare.

- **Helping with transport arrangements for children at special schools**

We have changed the rules to allow children with additional needs who attend specialist provision to be picked up or dropped off at an address other than their home. This supports parents to have a choice where they access care for their children whilst they are working.





In order that more people can access more jobs we commit to:

- ☒ Further **increasing the range of mid and highly skilled jobs available.**
- ☒ **Maximising new funding opportunities to continue to provide a cohesive employment and skills provision** such as using the European Social Fund and the Eastern Region Development Fund.
- ☒ **Improving free access to digital media and technology** for those who do not have their own access and increasing broadband coverage across all areas in Central Bedfordshire.
- ☒ **Improving public transport** to enable access to work.
- ☒ Increasing the availability of the **Wheels to Work programme.**
- ☒ Ensuring there is sufficient **affordable, accessible childcare.**
- ☒ **Developing and growing traineeships and apprenticeships** across Central Bedfordshire, communicating skills reforms to local employers, including making these schemes more accessible to people with learning difficulties or other disadvantaged groups.
- ☒ Further developing work skills with **better support for residents to secure employment.**
- ☒ **Continuing to support the development of employability skills,** through training, work placements, volunteering and enterprise.
- ☒ Expanding and promoting information, advice and guidance to **support people into learning, education and employment; and support those in employment to progress their chosen career.**
- ☒ Further utilising procurement and planning opportunities to **encourage employers to employ apprentices, utilise local labour and upskill those who have the potential to enter employment** with further skills /qualifications.
- ☒ Work with the providers of the **Bedfordshire Mental Health and Wellbeing Service** to offer support for individuals who are experiencing depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, extreme shyness, obsessive behaviour, phobias or relationship difficulties.



2) Help with housing

Welfare reform has placed greater pressure on vulnerable low income households where maintaining secure accommodation is set against rising private sector rents and house prices, effectively limiting affordable housing options. We provide practical help for people and families who are struggling financially.



- **Helping financially**

Our refreshed Debt Management Policy places a much greater emphasis on mediation and exploring options before going to court to recover debts. Households in receipt of housing benefit can apply to us for help with rent in advance rent deposits, help with removal costs and a shortfall in rent under our Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.

- **Helping to stop homelessness**

- One month's rent deposit can be paid by us on behalf of households who are in need of private rented accommodation because they are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- In addition, our Housing Solutions team can assist households with some housing related costs where it will enable the household to remain in their home and prevent them becoming homeless, or enable rehousing solutions through our "Lets Rent" scheme to qualifying households who cannot remain in their current home.
- We commission a support service to promote and increase the independent living skills of vulnerable people to prevent homelessness.
- Households are assisted to develop life skills and address barriers preventing them from living independently in the community, which allows them to maintain their accommodation.
- Single homeless people who are unable to access and sustain accommodation are amongst the most vulnerable and marginalised

in society. Since March 2013, NOAH Enterprise has been commissioned, with Government grant funding, to provide an outreach service to assist people sleeping rough. The grant funding was also utilised to provide set up funding for direct access accommodation in Leighton Buzzard. The "No Second Night Out" initiative has improved access to information and accommodation pathways for people sleeping rough and has assisted us to more accurately assess the extent of rough sleeping in the area.

- **Keeping homes safe and warm**

- Our Renewal Policy provides for Home Improvement Assistance, Affordable Warmth Assistance, and Safety, Security and Emergency Repair Grants which can be used to carry out essential repairs, works to address housing hazards, install security measures, and to provide energy efficiency measures. In order to target resources at those most in need, these assistance types are either means-tested or require the applicant to be in receipt of certain benefits or be in fuel poverty.
- It is estimated that 7.2% of Central Bedfordshire households live with fuel poverty. Technical Officers from the Housing Solutions team offer free home energy surveys and advice on measures which could reduce fuel costs and improve warmth, as well a leaflet on getting ready for winter and heatwave advice. Regular drop-in sessions are provided at Watling House run by Age UK to provide customers over 55 with information and advice on keeping warm, money management and other related issues.



- **Makes more homes available**

- The Housing Solutions service offers Empty Homes Loan Assistance which not only enhances the local community but also provides affordable housing options for low income households. In return for the loan, a property owner may be required to sign up to a 10 year nomination agreement. Housing Options officers are able to directly offer a rehousing solution to a homeless household through the return to use of empty homes.



In order to continue improving the practical help available to residents we commit to:

- ☒ Developing plans with **children's services** to meet the housing needs of care leavers.
- ☒ Increasing the supply of **affordable private rented accommodation**.
- ☒ Developing and promoting a range of **tenancy sustainment services** and **housing support services** that meet the needs of homeless people and raise their aspirations.
- ☒ **Minimising the use of unsuitable and expensive bed and breakfast accommodation** ensuring that families are not placed there other than in an emergency and for no longer than six weeks.
- ☒ Developing an approach to **manage the impact of universal credit on our tenants** including encouraging Registered Providers (Housing Associations) to develop budgeting workshops and bespoke advice services for their tenants.
- ☒ Ensuring that the **Housing Solutions service** actively works with customers to raise their aspirations and **help them access employment education and training**.
- ☒ Building on the work carried out through the "Warm Homes, Healthy People" programme by reviewing staffing resources required to take forward the recommendations and targets in the Government's publication "**Cutting the Cost of Keeping Warm – A fuel poverty strategy for England**".



3) Build resilience

We will do this by providing a range of information and advice services which our residents can readily access, enabling them to make informed choices. The Advice Strategy* states that “effective advice can have beneficial effects on a wide range of personal issues, such as income maximisation, financial managements, legal right, personal confidence and empowerment, and health and wellbeing”.

- **Help with paying Council bills**

For Council Tax payers who are struggling to meet payments, there is a range of help available including rescheduling payments, an assessment for suitability for the local council tax support scheme or other reductions that might be available including single person discount and exemptions, advice on budgeting and referral to the Citizens' Advice Money Advisors team for free, independent advice and help.



- **Providing information, advice and advocacy services**

Citizens Advice are supported by us through grant funding of approximately £1¼m. They are the key source of advice for those affected by welfare reform; also providing advice on debt and money management, along with consumer advice, legal and housing issues and a wealth of additional advice. Our funding enables three services to operate at four venues, open for a total of 95 hours a week. Advice Central acts as a portal to advice services. Clients can contact via a single telephone number or website/ email address. Advice Central provides a triage to diagnose need and refers to the most

appropriate advice organisation and was launched on 2 March 2015. Central Bedfordshire Advice Forum, supported by us, joins up the work of a range of advice agencies to ensure a coordinated approach. It ensures implementation of actions in the Advice Strategy. POHWER is an independent advocacy service, contracted by us to give free advocacy support to any adult. This includes people who lack mental capacity to make decisions about their care arrangements or are subject to mental health orders. The requirement to provide advocacy to those who need it, to enable access to financial information or advice, has been strengthened by the Care Act.



- **Providing easy to follow advice leaflets**

We have produced a range of useful leaflets for residents claiming Council Tax Benefit, and those affected by the Benefit Cap and/or the removal of the Under Occupation subsidy.

- **Providing emergency financial help**

We have a Local Welfare Provision Scheme which is administered by the Housing Solutions service, and supports the most vulnerable and deprived people within Central Bedfordshire.

The Emergency fund provides households with small payments following an emergency or disaster to meet immediate

day to day living expenses and the Grant fund provides goods and services to help vulnerable people live as independent a life as possible in the community.

- **Supporting Credit Unions**

Credit Unions have been supported to develop in the Central Bedfordshire area, providing services which are already operational in neighbouring authorities. Credit Unions provide savings, loans and financial advice/support.

- **Helping cancer sufferers**

The Macmillan Welfare Rights Service is hosted by us and aims to mitigate the financial impact of a cancer diagnosis and support the delivery of first class cancer care. This is done

by visiting people in their own homes and supporting them to claim the benefits they are entitled to. The service covers both Central Bedfordshire and Bedford and achieves over £2m per year in benefits and grants for its clients.



To further build resilience and enable individuals to help themselves we commit to:



Offer additional assistance to enable the **Credit Unions** to grow and expand the services that are available.



Work to ensure the continuation and development of **Advice Central service**.



Review the level of financial assistance provided through the **Safety, Security and Emergency Repair Grant** to ensure that the grant covers the cost of qualifying works.



Continue to provide funding where possible through the **Local Welfare Provision grant** which ensures direct and accessible support for households in severe financial difficulties



Ensure that advice and support services are aware of and signpost clients to **employment support services**.



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