

National News

Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report – December 2005

The Report included the following announcements affecting families, children and young people:

- A detailed package of measures to **reform the Tax Credits system** including an increase in the income disregard and changes to the way overpayments are recovered.
- A £75 increase in the child element of **Child Tax Credit**.
- **Child Benefit** increased in line with prices.
- Publication of “*Support for parents: the best start for children*” as part of a strategy to improve outcomes for **children and young people**.
- An extension of the **New Deal Plus** for lone parents.
- Publication of the interim report from the Leitch Review of Skills and a pilot scheme of **Learning Agreements** to provide greater training options for 16-17 year olds not in work or education.
- Funding for a **national youth community service** to fund gap year and volunteering opportunities.
- A **youth fund** worth an average of £500,000 for each local authority over the next two years.

Youth charities to benefit from ‘dormant’ millions

Discussions between the financial services industry and the Treasury have resulted in Gordon Brown announcing the decision to use “several hundred million” pounds in dormant bank accounts for youth services and financial education. An account will be defined as dormant if it has not been touched for 15 years, although there will be further consultation on the detail of this definition. A commission has been set up to decide how the money will be distributed, however, the Chancellor has said that the investment should “focus on youth services ... and financial education and exclusion”.

More disabled people living below poverty line

Three out of 10 disabled adults of working age are living in poverty and the proportion is increasing according to a report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in December.

The research, by the New Policy Institute, found that a higher proportion of disabled people are living in poverty than 10 years ago. They are more likely than pensioners or children to be living below the official poverty line and twice as likely as able-bodied adults to be below the breadline. The proportion of pensioners and children living in households with below 60% of average earnings has fallen, but working age adults without children, and disabled people have sunk further into poverty.

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Tackling Poverty Together in Bedfordshire

2005 was a productive and successful year for Bedfordshire's **Tackling Poverty Together Group**. The Group commissioned research (funded by Bedfordshire County Council) into **Benefits Take-up and Advice Provision in Bedfordshire** and is working to take forward the recommendations from this report. In July, with the financial support of the County, Borough and District Councils the Group hosted its 4th countywide anti-poverty conference, **The Cost of Debt**, looking at issues surrounding personal debt.

The Group's **website** www.tacklingpoverty-beds.org.uk continues to flourish attracting a steadily increasing number of visitors and plans are afoot for a design revamp later this year.

The Group has decided that, as part of its continuing aim to address financial exclusion in Bedfordshire, it will promote and support the establishment of a **Credit Union in Mid Bedfordshire**. A meeting has been arranged for February with Aragon Housing Association to discuss the feasibility of such a project. Bedford Credit Union has also offered its support. Consideration will need to be given to the funding and location of a proposed credit union as well as the formation of a local ‘pressure group’ to bring the proposal to fruition.

If you are interested in joining the TPT Group, or would like more information on its activities, please contact Len Simkins on 01234 360607 or email len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Update

Eastern Region ... Eastern Region ... Eastern Region...

Update

The public consultation on the **Rural Social and Community Programme** came to a successful conclusion in October 2005. Many helpful and positive responses were made from this region that helped to develop a stronger and more focussed programme. In Bedfordshire, voluntary sector partners worked together through the Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum (BRAf) to pull together a Business Case for submission to GO-East outlining the aspirations of the voluntary sector in Bedfordshire to identify and address rural social exclusion over the next two years through a range of measures aimed at building the capacity of individuals and communities. Once the Business Case is approved partners will develop specific projects for funding from 1st April 2006. Separate funding was made available both to the BRAf network and to Bedfordshire Association of Local Councils (BALK) to enable local partners to develop a robust Business Case for funding and to enable widespread consultation and engagement with the rural voluntary and community sector.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) - local partners are currently engaged in negotiations so that agreements can be reached by early next year. The LAA is on course to start delivery from 1st April. Government Office advice is available on the outcomes that must be included within the LAA and also on other outcomes that Bedfordshire partners would like to include to reflect local priorities, particularly those identified in Community Strategies. This includes the opportunity to include rural priorities under the appropriate block headings: Children and Young People; Safer and Stronger Communities; Healthier Communities; and Economic Development and Enterprise.

EEDA is developing a single co-ordinated website for all **Investing in Communities** partnerships which will present both regional and sub-regional content. A temporary website is now up and running and can be accessed via the EEDA website www.EEDA.org.uk or directly at www.investingincommunities.org.uk

Update

South Bedfordshire

Update

The next **Downside Estate Multi-Agency meeting** will be held on Thursday 23rd February from 9.30 am to 1.00 pm at St Augustines Church Hall, Oakwood Avenue, Downside, Dunstable. The meeting will feedback on the Downside Estate Plan and plan the next steps to move the plan forward; set up a task group for the Downside 'On the Up' community conference proposed for 6th May 2006; and update on the Downside Trailblazer project. Please contact Hazel Goldman on 02072 417477 or email hazel@freeform.org.uk if you would like to attend this meeting, or add an item to the agenda.

The **Interim Parish Plan** scheme is available in Bedfordshire until 31/3/06. Up to £2,500 is available for parishes wishing to undertake an appraisal of their locality. So far, although no grants have been awarded, there has been strong interest expressed in the scheme. A grants panel will be held by BRAf in December and it is expected that up to six applications will be ready for consideration. It is anticipated that a further grants panel will be needed early next year and this should enable Bedfordshire to fully utilise the total allocated funding of £19,794. There is also a proposal within Bedfordshire's draft Rural Social and Community Programme Business Plan to continue funding Parish Plans for another two years. After this date it is expected that parish plans will be firmly mainstreamed within Bedfordshire's local priorities.

Update

Mid Bedfordshire

Update

Mid Beds. CAB scores 96% !! Mid Beds. Citizens Advice Bureau has achieved one of the highest scores in the region in an independent audit conducted by National CAB. The audit assessed the quality of advice, administration, finances and other systems and passed them as very firmly up to the standard expected of a citizens advice bureau providing continuous quality of service. Each CAB undergoes a rigorous audit every three years to ensure it can remain a member of the national Citizens Advice association and that it can retain its Legal Services Commission 'Quality Mark'. A test for quality of advice is a recent introduction, designed to further test individual bureau operations across the country and ensure consistent, high quality service across the whole Citizens Advice service. Mid Beds. CAB Manager Alasdair Christie thanked all the staff and volunteers, paid and unpaid, in the bureau for the hard work that made this result possible.

If you would like to contact the Mid Beds. CAB's high quality team for free advice on any issue - money, benefits, relationships, housing or consumer rights - please ring 01525 404511 or 01767 314961; or visit the offices in Ampthill and Biggleswade; or call in at one of the local drop-in sessions at Sandy, Maulden and Shefford.

If you have any comments on **Poverty News**, or would like to contribute an article, please contact: Sue Walmsley on 01234 360607 or go to the 'contact us' page on the TPT website: www.tacklingpoverty-beds.org.uk

Update

Bedfordshire...

Update

Following a period of consultation, the Bedfordshire & Luton **Investing in Communities** Partnership have identified key priorities for the first business Plan. The key issues to emerge are:

- Work limiting illness / employability
- Children & Education
- Transition from School
- Adult Skills and Training
- Business Support and Social enterprise

The second draft of the Business Plan was submitted to EEDA in early December. Consultants have now been appointed to map out what is already being delivered via mainstream and discretionary funding so that strategic gaps and examples of best practice from other parts of the region and around the UK can be identified.

'**ChangeUp**' is a Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework for the Voluntary and Community sector. It dates back to the Government's 2002 cross-cutting review of the role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in service delivery, which recognised that the sector and Government have a mutual interest in building the capacity of voluntary and community organisations. The aim is that by 2014 the needs of frontline voluntary and community organisations will be met by support which is available nationwide, structured for maximum efficiency, offering excellent provision, accessible to all, truly reflecting and promoting diversity, and sustainably funded. To deliver this agenda in Bedfordshire a consortium, comprising the 4 Councils for Voluntary Service in Bedfordshire & Luton, Beds. Rural Communities Charity, Beds. & Luton Council for Voluntary Youth Service and Bedford Race Equality Council was formed, which has successfully secured funding. For more information, contact Mark Smith at Mid Beds. CVS on 01525 841160 or mark@midbedscvs.org.uk

Cost of A Free Education - Further information material has recently been produced as part of this project - which is looking at the impact on low income families of the costs associated with state education such as school uniforms, trips and extra-curricula activities. The material includes:

- *How to Reduce the Cost of a "Free Education"* - a leaflet giving practical tips for schools
- Update Report on the project

This new information, along with a copy of the documentary film (which was produced last year), has been sent to all upper and middle schools in Bedfordshire.

The issue has also received some national recognition recently with the publication of a short report, *The Cost of a Free Education*, by Citizens Advice.

Contact Len Simkins (01234 360607) for further details.

Update

Bedford

Update

Bedford Credit Union has welcomed its **1,000th member** and has loaned more than **£1 million** to its membership since opening in 1998. BCU has received independent confirmation of the great work that it does in supporting the local community. A professional "Social Return on Investment" (SROI) analysis of the business shows that BCU is returning to the local community just over four times the financial value invested in it. **"The main result of this analysis is that members, the public purse and the community . . . are significantly better off because of the existence of Bedford Credit Union"**

BCU is working closely with the recently formed **Credit Union East (CUE) network** – the aim is to work to promote and develop the Credit Union movement in the east of England. The forum is open to interested organisations to get involved. Please contact Kim Norris on 01234 346352 or bedcuk@tiscali.co.uk

And finally ... BCU has a vacancy for a **School Development Officer** to develop saving clubs in schools to encourage students to save money and learn about money management. For more information contact Kim Norris, details as above. The closing date is 30/1/06.

Keep Warm, Safe & Well, an event supported by Bedford Borough Council, took place in November in Bedford. Over 250 people attended the event. Organisations such as the PCT, Energy Efficiency, Home Watch and Trading Standards were there to give information and advice to the elderly on the theme of keeping warm, safe and well. Benefits advisors were also present. Older people could have their electric blankets tested – if the blanket failed the safety test they were given a free replacement. 148 blankets were tested and 107 failed!

Family Groups (Bedford) are groups that bring together women, with or without children, who for geographical, cultural, language and social reasons may not be reached by other provisions. There are currently 6 Family Groups in Bedford & Kempston and a recently introduced group called 'Baby Bollywood' focusing on language development. Family Groups also offers training opportunities to women to help them return to work. For more information, call 01234 316801 or email familygroups@clara.co.uk

Be Healthy (Bedford Healthy Living Initiative) is a network of 13 projects which provide advice & information, social activities and family support services. Its aim is to tackle inequalities in health and projects are targeted at certain groups and areas where these are likely to exist. Specifically these are older people and young families living in the Caludwell, Kingsbrook, Queens Park, Harpur, Goldington and Kempston wards. For more information call 01234 792047 or email b.healthy@bedford-pct.nhs.uk

Fuel Poverty

Abigail Basketter is the Energy & Waste Efficiency Officer at Bedford Borough Council. In October she gave a presentation to Bedford Advice Forum on fuel poverty and related training for advisors. This article is based on her presentation.

What is Fuel Poverty?

A fuel poor household is one that needs to spend more than 10% of its income on all fuel use in order to heat its home to an adequate standard of warmth (21°C in the living room and 18°C in other occupied rooms).

The **causes** of fuel poverty include: the energy efficiency of a property; the occupancy level compared to the size of the property; the income of a household; the cost of fuel and the external environment.

Fuel poverty can have a significant **effect** on health particularly in the exacerbation of existing health problems, thus contributing to the 40,000 excess winter deaths per year. Over half of these deaths are due to cardiovascular disease and a third from respiratory disease. The underlying cause of 80% of excess winter deaths is the cold.

Who are the Fuel Poor?

Households of one person aged over 60 and older couples with no children are the most vulnerable to fuel poverty (37% and 20% of fuel poor households respectively). Other vulnerable groups include families with young children and the long-term sick or disabled. It was estimated that in 2001 there were 2 million households living in fuel poverty in the UK.

Government Fuel Poverty targets

- Eradication of fuel poverty for the vulnerable by 2010
- Eradication of fuel poverty for the vulnerable and non-vulnerable in social housing by 2010
- Complete eradication of fuel poverty by 2016

Rising fuel costs are undoing some of the progress made to date with some households sliding back into fuel poverty.

Local Action

In 2003 Bedford Borough Council drew up a Fuel Poverty Action Plan which resulted in a training programme for advisors and a referral scheme for those living in fuel poverty to access the grants and discounts available. The objectives of the training offered to advisors are to:

- Raise awareness of fuel poverty
- Train advisors to recognise the triggers which may indicate fuel poverty
- Train advisors to refer vulnerable households

The Borough Council also offers outreach advice sessions directly to the public at, for instance, exhibitions for older peoples' services.

For more information please contact Abigail Basketter on 01234 227364 or abasketter@bedford.gov.uk



"A fresh look at fuel poverty in Bedfordshire"
Tuesday 28th February, 1.00-4.45 pm (lunch included)
Aldwyck Housing Association. Houghton Regis



This **free event**, organised by Bedfordshire Sustainable Energy Partnership (Beds. SEP) aims to provide:

- Up-to-date information on and solutions to fuel poverty
- A new, easy to use fuel poverty mapping toolkit
- Secrets of successful fuel poverty work
- Benefits for youth training & education, social inclusion and health improvement.

The line-up will include national experts in the fuel poverty field and local innovators who have achieved real improvement for residents.

This event will offer a **free** opportunity to professionals involved in the affordable warmth agenda from housing associations, local authorities, voluntary organisations, the health sector, etc., to tackle an issue that affects 17% of all households in Bedfordshire and is a major factor in 80% of excess winter deaths.

For more information contact Liz Stringer on 01582 584200 or email thatsit@btinternet.com

Websites...Research...Publications...Reports...Websites ...

Bedford Credit Union now has a website. Why not have a look? www.bedfordcreditunion.co.uk

Rural Communities Database - <http://crc.rocktimeweb.net/> - contains information on how nearly 5,000 rural communities have identified and begun to tackle social exclusion in their area.

The Children's Information Service and Bedfordshire Children's Fund have launched a new **directory of information on family support services** available in Bedfordshire on www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/familysupport