

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

Minutes of Forum Meeting

11.15am - Thursday 24th June 2021 on Zoom

Present:

Amanda Ryan	BPHA (chair)
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins	Autism Bedfordshire
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights – Central Bedfordshire Council
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Self-Help Group
Jane Owen	CVS Beds (minutes)
Chera Gilbert	Disability Resource Centre
Chiara MacCall	Queens Park Community Organisation
Susanna Fagg	Royal British Legion
Amanda Thaxter	Carers in Bedfordshire
Yasmina Mahmood	Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council
Carol Madden	Money Advice at St Andrews
Brian Cunningham	BRASS

Apologies:

Trevor Moisey	Three Rivers Church, Bedford
Karen Lister	Salvation Army Bedford
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Beccy Campbell-Grieve	Project 229
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds

2. Minutes of last Forum meeting (18th March 2021) and matters arising

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed. There were no matters arising that were not on the agenda.

3. Information Exchange

Brian - Brass

Refugee Week was last week. The event at St Pauls Church went well. The Higgins ran a knitathon and an event by a refugee artist. Market stall outside in Harpur Square was well-attended by colleagues and clients coming to chat although the intention to hand out myth-busting leaflets had a cautious response. The usual 5 a side football tournament has been postponed. The week was quieter than usual but it was good to do something and was busier than last year.

BRASS are still providing advice by telephone and staff are meeting this afternoon about returning to the office but are unlikely to return imminently as telephone advice is working so well, and face to face is already given when needed. Tutoring via zoom is working very well after a reluctant start so those classes may not restart in person. A new Afghan Family is arriving soon, (in addition to the 21 Syrian families already being supported) and the backlog of families being housed that was due to Covid is starting to be dealt with which will keep BRASS very busy.

Brian recommended a recent talk he had attended given by Yarls Wood Befrienders which shared information about forthcoming changes at Yarls Wood Immigration Removal Centre.

Elliott - GUHG

Within GUHG Refugee Week saw a colleague raising awareness of issues experienced in immigration removal centres, and providing housing for refugees continues.

Working with BLMK to provide hoarding training for residents through group and one to one support. Spaces are still available for any other GU customers.

Sam – Macmillan Welfare Rights

Peterborough and Hinchinbrook hospitals have already started allowing face to face support sessions and these will resume at Bedford Hospital on 13th July. L&D Hospital still in complete lockdown so no date for that yet.

Funding for the services is extended to December 2024. The service has been re-awarded AQS.

Paulette – Bedford Community Self Help Group

Activities have mainly been telephone and online support. They have worked with Legacy of Windrush Descendants and Friends to provide food hampers to individuals. Meeting have been held with the mayor of Bedford about Covid and other subjects.

Chiara - QPCO

Chiara is one of three new community intervention officers that have been employed using Harpur Trust funding to amplify the work that's already been done by volunteers over Covid. The organisation started in Queens Park area of Bedford but extends across wider Bedfordshire supporting individuals in need, working closely with other organisations. A holistic approach is taken, not just signposting, using volunteers embedded in the community and soft intelligence, in order to catch people that fall through the net and hand-holding them to access other services. Free professional multilingual service about linking in with other services, with a fund to pay for interpreters and a fund for people in crisis due to DV. Still providing food parcels for those in need and running exercise programs outdoors. The service will take referrals from any organisation, the community or volunteers and the staff are staff soon taking on a caseload and are currently designing leaflets about the service.

Susanna Fagg - Royal British Legion

Service is still fully running, virtually, and anyone who has ever served in the armed forces (or their partner) can be referred. Members are encouraged to ask this question of service users in order to refer them across for additional support.

Saturday is Forces Day.

Continuing to participate in the steering group for the Armed Forces Covenant.

ELFT are just about to receive Veteran Healthcare Alliance accreditation – not sure about Bedford and L&D hospitals.

Lots of issues have arisen relating to digital exclusion and a pot of money has been put together to support individuals with a package (device and connectivity) - a flyer will be circulated.

Right to Stay if serving in armed forces and then leaving but wanting to stay.

Amanda – Carers in Beds

Back doing some face to face sessions outdoors and at a couple of risk-assessed cafés. Groups are still mainly online apart from walking groups and wellbeing sessions. Group-based support was intended to restart face to face in July but some venues are not ready so now likely to be September. Service is really busy, and several jobs are currently being advertised.

New Diverse Communities project as 2 support workers working with communities whose first language is Urdu, Punjabi or Bengali. Videos and literature in these three languages available over their website but also can be delivered to venues. Funding was initially from Carers Trust and looking to extend the project through additional funding from elsewhere. Amanda asked members to let her know of any community groups where there is a lack of support for carers, as this could be built in to applications for funding.

Carol Madden – Money Advice at St Andrews

Not seeing clients face-to-face but working through the risk assessments and aiming for September. Seeing clients over zoom is time consuming due to needing to take them through the process of signing the agreement form. Will carry on offering zoom as an alternative and considering holding the first appointment face to face and then swapping to zoom as it means more capacity is available for appointments. There is a slow, steady stream of clients, and whilst the service is not inundated as feared they might be, a rise is expected once furlough and other benefits help ends. Have had

some new volunteers but need more. Funding had previously come from a legacy left to the church but demands on the legacy are higher now than ever so trying to reduce that, and some funding has been secured from Harpur Trust.

Chera - DRC

New premises not ready yet so still not face to face but a temporary pop up centre will be working until the Mayfield Centre is finalised. Want to get back to front facing because pop up in Luton St Georges Square was well attended and service users really want to get back to in-person support.

Confirmed funding for Advice Central for another year. Have received funding for a peer academy to support people into employment project and a personal assistant academy. Carers Central project covers just Luton, high uptake, just started

A proportion of the cohort of existing volunteers are older or have health issues and cant go back into front facing role so additional volunteers are being recruited for the customer services team.

Yasmina – Hospital Social Work Team (Bedford Borough Council)

Operating a telephone service only but would have normally been based at the hospital. The new normal will be to work from home so it appears that the hospital social work team not return into the hospital other than for specific meetings. The team can do home visits but only out of necessity, and telephone support is working well apart from difficulties where there is no family support.

Amanda - BPHA

Mental Health First Aiders (for staff) and the Domestic Abuse Responders (for residents) are busier than expected which is thought to be due to the current uncertainty.

Looking for new/innovative tools and resources to include in the money advice service – what else could Bpha do to make life easier for their residents?

Len - Autism Bedfordshire

Autism Bedfordshire office opening was planned for June but now deferred to the Autumn.

Children's Services are currently running short break clubs in term-time and are planning for their summer scheme with reduced numbers. Part-time benefits adviser job was advertised - and new service starting soon

4. Mutual Assistance

Members are invited to email Amanda Ryan with any offers of, or requests for, help.

5. Update on BAF activities.

Len provided a verbal update, which included:

- Universal Credit training for benefits advisors course ran successfully. In the process, a need was identified for an Overview of UC course for non-specialist, frontline staff. Furlough will end and economic difficulties including redundancy are expected to increase this need.
- An Overview of UC session was run in an Academy school in Bedford Borough for staff, and a wider, open session will be running on 15th July. It's a 2 hour session delivered online and members are encouraged to email Len to book places asap. Also looking for BAF members who may want to present the course in future who will be invited to shadow Len and Elliott presenting the next session.
- The Benefits Network will continue to be supported by BAF and meetings have been well attended by usually around 20 people. The next one will be on 30th September.
- The Advice Strategy approach in Central Bedfordshire is likely to change this year. Also a new Steering Group has been set up to provide partnership support to Advice Central (hosted by DRC)
- Voluntaryworks trading company will be officially closed soon as no longer needed and a donation of £755 from dissolution has been paid into BAF bank account.

Len will circulate a written report (attached).

6. Any Other Business

Elliott encouraged members to email ideas for speakers to BAF steering group members which are for subjects that members would like to know more about.

The steering group will soon need to discuss if/when BAF meetings revert back to face-to-face and whether online/Zoom may continue for some meetings.

Proposed dates of future forum meetings:

- Thursday 18th November 2021 10am
- Thursday 24th February 2022 10am

UPDATE REPORT FOR BAF MEETING

Update on BAF projects and activities

BAF training

Universal Credit - online programmes (January and February 2021)

Two UC programmes (8 training sessions) were successfully completed earlier this year with 32 attendees in total. These programmes were aimed at advisers. Funding was provided by The Harpur Trust.

Overview of UC - online session (Spring 2021)

A further grant of £1,000 was awarded by The Harpur Trust for this extra work. This overview session is aimed at community staff and volunteers.

An initial online session was held with the HEART Academies Trust in Bedford on 27th May.

A second online session will be held for wider community staff in Bedford Borough on 15th July. Places are still available on this training.

The tutors (Elliott and Len) can offer support to anybody from BAF agencies who wants to train up to be able to present this "Overview of UC" session in the future – either in-house at their own agencies or externally on behalf of BAF.

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

These network meetings, for benefit advisers, are very well attended (average attendance is about 20 per meeting). BAF will again be supporting the network in 2021/22.

The next BBN meeting will be at 10.00am on 30th September.

Advice Strategy – Central Bedfordshire

CBC has confirmed its grant of £1,000 as a contribution towards BAF's core costs in 2021/22 to enable BAF to support the advice sector in Central Bedfordshire.

However, the future of the Advice Strategy itself is still being discussed. The 3rd edition of the Strategy was due to be launched this April (after being postponed from last year because of the Covid crisis). After 10 years of using an Advice Strategy, there is a feeling that a new approach may be needed for the relationship between CBC and the advice sector.

A discussion on the future approach will be held at the next Advice Strategy Management Group meeting on 20th September.

The 2021/22 funding for AdviceCentral has been confirmed. A Steering Group has been set-up to provide some support for AC, and to enhance partnership involvement in AC.

Advice Bedfordshire

The AGM for Advice Bedfordshire (BAF's trading company) was held earlier today. The Company's Annual Report has been circulated to BAF members

The current bank balance for the Company is £30.36. However, this does not include the management fees for the UC programmes that were organised earlier this year because the finances for the training were not completed by the end of March.

Voluntaryworks Consortium

BAF is a partner in the Voluntaryworks (VW) Consortium, and I represent BAF at Consortium meetings.

The Consortium is now closing down its trading company (Voluntaryworks Ltd), due to lack of activity. The company's bank account has recently been closed and, as a VW Ltd partner, BAF was sent a share (£754.97) of the company's final assets.

Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group

I attend the BedIPAG meetings on behalf of BAF.

There have been no meetings yet in 2021.

Len Simkins – Project Consultant

24/6/21