

Minutes of Forum Meeting

15th September 2020

Present:

Carol Madden	Money Advice at St Andrews
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins	Autism Bedfordshire
Chera Gilbert	Disability Resource Centre
JP Smith	Hightown Housing Association
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds

Apologies

Trevor Moisey	Three Rivers Church, Bedford
Noor D'Agostino	Catalyst Housing Association
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Support Project
Brian Cunningham	BRASS
Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Karen Lister	Salvation Army
Sylvia Macdowell	Money Advice at St Andrews
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights

Action

Chera Gilbert chaired the meeting on behalf of BAF's Steering Group.

- 1 **Apologies for absence** were noted (listed above).

2 **Minutes of last Forum meeting (11th June) and Matters Arising**

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

There were no matters arising that were not on the agenda.

6 **Information Exchange**

Elliott - Grand Union Housing Group – Elliott confirmed GUHG are continuing to work remotely, with limited number of staff using the office. Visits are being conducted where considered necessary only. All advice services are operating with these conditions.

Carol - Money Advice at St Andrews – The service continues to operate remotely, and the numbers are increasing. A new role of Client Support Worker has been established, but the number of debt advisors is becoming a real problem.

Maureen – Sight Concern – Maureen has been in the role since June. All clients over the age of 70 have been contacted and supported or signposted as required over the past few months.

JP – Hightown – Many staff are still working from home.

Chera – Advice Central – Back Office functions are relocating to the Rufus Centre in Flitwick in October. Ongoing challenges with people needing to book to look at mobility equipment, etc.

Len - Autism Beds – Only a limited number of staff have been using the office. A great deal of work was undertaken to ensure a programme of summer activities was safely delivered.

Martin - CVS – CVS staff are back in the office on a rota basis, and the meeting rooms are available to let on a limited basis. Martin also briefly explained the role of the VCSE Emergency Partnership, for whom Martin is the Local Liaison.

5 BAF Membership

The meeting discussed the issue of membership, and reviewed the list of members for 2019-20.

Membership forms for the current year were sent out in late August, with a good response to date.

Martin and Len will review the lists to ensure that those attending Benefits Network meetings are also invited to become a member.

6 BAF Training

The Steering Group have been considering the options for delivering training courses, and it is felt that face-to-face courses are unviable for the foreseeable future.

Work to secure funding to assist with moving courses online has begun. A number of the courses will also need to be adjusted and possibly split into smaller 'bite-size' options, to make them more appealing and accessible. It is hoped that a series of Universal Credit webinars can be arranged in the autumn. The group expressed support for this work.

7 Update on other BAF Activities

Len provided a written report - attached

8 Any other business

The next meeting of the Benefits Network is on the 24th Sep. Anyone wishing to attend should contact Len Simkins (len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk).

Future meeting dates

- Thursday 26th November 2020 – 10am

Documents discussed at this meeting can be found at www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk

UPDATE REPORT FOR FORUM MEETING

Update on BAF projects

BAF training

BAF's Steering Group has decided that it is still unrealistic to plan any face-to-face BAF training at the moment. So there will be no normal BAF training courses in 2020. The Steering Group will review things at the end of the year to see if any training might be possible in early 2021.

However, the Steering Group has set up a Sub-Group to consider BAF developing some online training.

The Sub-Group has agreed two pieces of action:

1. To look into the possibility of running some **online Universal Credit webinars** this autumn. These could be in the form of 4 short sessions rather than a full day course.
2. To look into applying for some **funding to enable BAF to set itself up as a recognised online training provider**, and to develop a wider programme of online courses. To take this forward Advice Bedfordshire (BAF's trading company) has applied for a £10,000 grant to Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation under its latest Covid-19 emergency grant funding.

Advice Strategy – Central Bedfordshire

This work is funded by Central Bedfordshire Council.

The flyer "Everybody's got a role in advice" has been revised to include a reference to the growing demands for advice in the Covid-19 crisis. This will be distributed (online) to frontline staff in Central Beds.

An online meeting of the Advice Strategy Management Group will be arranged for October. Hopefully the report on the VCS review in Central Bedfordshire will be ready then. We can also decide on an interim Delivery Plan for the Advice Strategy until we are in a position (post Covid-19) to be able to make longer-term plans.

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

The next online meeting of the BBN is at 10.00 on 24th September.

Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group

I represent BAF at IPAG meetings. No meetings have been held recently.

Voluntaryworks Consortium

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

In 2018/19 BAF (through Advice Bedfordshire) supported the VW Ltd Building Better Opportunities Project by providing project management services. The project has now been selected for an audit by the Big Lottery. The VW Consortium met on 12th August to discuss and plan how to respond to the audit request. This work will not affect BAF / Advice Bedfordshire directly, and will be organised by Voluntaryworks in October.

The next VW Consortium meeting is on 8th October.

Advice Bedfordshire

There has been no activity in the Advice Bedfordshire bank account since the last BAF meeting apart from a payment of £0.30 for bank interest.

The current bank balance is **£209.26**.

Len Simkins – BAF Project Consultant
15/9/20