

Minutes of Forum Meeting

11th June 2020

Present:

Martin Trinder	CVS Beds
Carol Madden	Money Advice at St Andrews
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins	Autism Bedfordshire
Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Karen Lister	Salvation Army
Kash Karimzandi	Citizens Advice Leighton Buzzard
Samantha Condor	Macmillan Welfare Rights
Sarah Broughton	Bedford Foodbank
Gill Reeves	BRCC
Brian Cunningham	BRASS
Chera Gilbert	Disability Resource Centre

Apologies

Trevor Moisey	Three Rivers Church, Bedford
Noor D'Agostino	Catalyst Housing Association
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Support Project

Action

Elliott Stephenson chaired the meeting on behalf of BAF's Steering Group.

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

2 **Minutes of last Forum meeting (6th February 2020) 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 updated colleagues on the procedures that GUHG had in place to both support home working, and arrangements for visiting clients in the future.

Chera – Advice Central – Staff are currently setting up the office to allow for a phased return to the office. DRC income is affected because meeting rooms cannot be let out.

Sam – Macmillan Welfare Rights – All staff continue to work from home. The number of referrals to the service is down 90%, so a surge is expected in the near future.

Gill – BRCC – Services have continued, despite staff not being in the office. Wellbeing champions and social prescribers have been very active over the past few months. Staff have seen a notable increase in mental health related issues.

Sarah - Bedford Foodbank – Sarah provided an outline of how the Foodbank has operated over the past 12 weeks, responding to massive demand, whilst dealing with social distancing and some of the long term volunteers needing to shield. All distribution centres (apart from Scott Hall) have remained open throughout. The March referrals were up 73%, but demand has now

settled down. Concerns over the level of demand going forward into a period of financial uncertainty.

Amanda – BPHA – Staff have been working from home, providing support for clients remotely. Measures are in place to minimise any financial impact (freepost envelopes, etc). BPHA have had great support from 4-mation when there was an urgent need to re-house a few people during the pandemic.

Kash – Citizens Advice – The service quickly moved away from face-to-face support, and has been offering phone-based support throughout the pandemic, which has created some issues such as social distancing in the office. There are some concerns that not everybody that needs support are willing or able to make use of a phone service.

Carol - Money Advice at St Andrews – The service has been operating remotely, with the help of funding to help with some the additional costs.

Karen - Salvation Army – A number of advisors have been working from home, and the service is unlikely to return to face-to-face advice for some time. More volunteers are needed.

Brian – BRASS – Staff have been home working, and there has been some benefits of giving advice over the phone, but concerns about who is being missed because they are not able/willing to access a phone service. BRASS are expecting a substantial increase in immigration related enquiries.

Len - Autism Beds – A number of services have been drastically affected, and a range of online services have been established. Consideration is being given to re-opening some clubs to provide limited provision in the summer holidays. The charity has been affected by the closure of their charity shops.

Martin - CVS – A substantial number of volunteers have come forward due to the pandemic, and the challenge is how to keep as many of them as possible involved.

4 **BAF Training**

The meeting discussed the need and feasibility for training courses in the next few months.

Online advice giving and Universal Credit were two issues that were suggested. The development of bite-size sessions might also be attractive to time-precious organisations.

BAF's SG will discuss BAF's training plans and potential funding at its next meeting.

5 **Update on BAF activities**

A written report will be circulated – attached to these minutes.

6 **Any other business**

None

Future meeting dates

- Tuesday 15th September 2020 – 10am
- Thursday 26th November 2020 – 10am

UPDATE REPORT FOR FORUM MEETING

Update on BAF projects

BAF training

BAF ran 2 courses last autumn. One outstanding training fee was finally paid on 17/4/20!

The accounts have now been finalised.

The Introduction to Benefits course was fully booked (17 attendees) and made a surplus of £158.41. The PIP course had lower bookings (9), but we decided to go ahead with this even though a small loss was predicted. This loss came out at £74.26.

This left an overall surplus of **£84.15** for the programme. £75 of this surplus has been transferred to BAF as a management fee.

To avoid the risk of losses from individual courses, we may need to slightly increase the training fees for future programmes.

We should start thinking about some future training programmes. Ideas that have already been suggested include: some advice skills training or workshops. For example:

- Some **advice skills training** (or workshops) eg interviewing skills for advisers; good practice in obtaining customer feedback
- **Universal Credit**
- Training directly related to **needs coming out of the Coronavirus Crisis** eg use of online meetings; telephone advice skills; how to provide online advice sessions to clients;

Advice Strategy – Central Bedfordshire

CBC is funding this work again in 2020/21, with a grant of £4,000. Of this, £3,000 is for support work relating to the CB Advice Strategy, and £1,000 is a contribution towards BAF's core costs to enable BAF to support the advice sector in Central Bedfordshire.

Prior to the Coronavirus Crisis, work relating to the Advice Strategy included:

- Production of a flyer "Everybody's got a role in advice", to be distributed to frontline staff in Central Beds.
- Updating of the Advice Strategy (2016-19) for a re-launch in April 2020
- Re-design of the Delivery Plan to support the new Strategy from April 2020

However, because of the current crisis, the above work has been put on hold and the focus has been on the emergency response from the advice sector. An online meeting of the Advice Strategy Management Group was held on 6th May to discuss this.

In terms of BAF's expected work in Central Bedfordshire, the current position is uncertain until there is a clearer picture on when the lockdown and crisis will end. But the traditional plans for the year would normally be:

- Hold at least one BAF meeting in Central Bedfordshire in 2020/21
- Continue to offer BAF services (BAF meeting, BBN meetings, and BAF training programmes) to agencies in Central Bedfordshire
- Consider organising training/information sessions on issues to support the Advice Strategy
- Use the Advice Proofing template to have an input into any new, relevant CB policies and strategies

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

An emergency online meeting of the BBN was held on 2nd April to discuss the new benefit rules introduced as a result of Coronavirus Crisis. This was attended by 16 people, and feedback was very positive.

At the BAF SG meeting on 7th May it was has agreed to continue with BBN facilitation in 2020/21.

A catch-up, online BBN meeting will be arranged on 25th June.

Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group

I attend the BedIPAG meetings on behalf of BAF.

No meetings have been held recently.

Voluntaryworks Consortium

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

Emergency online meetings of the Consortium were held on 30th April and 27th May to discuss the current crisis and the impact on the local voluntary sector. The next meeting is on 16th July.

Advice Bedfordshire

The Company's 2019/20 accounts have now been finalised, and circulated. These were approved at the Company's AGM today.

Income for last year was £9,793.23, and expenditure was £9,781.16. This resulted in a trading surplus of **£12.07** for the year.

This left a balance of **£208.96** in the Company's bank account on 31/3/20.

So far there has been no financial activity for 2020/21, and so the current balance is still **£208.96**.

Len Simkins – Project Consultant
11/6/20