

Present:

Amanda Ryan	BPHA (chair)
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Melanie Gomez	Hightown Housing Association
Sylvia MacDowell	Money Advice at St Andrews
Jenny Harris	Carers in Bedfordshire
Justine Hunt	Beds Rural Communities Charity
Steven Kunes	Hightown Housing Association
Chiara Mac Call	Queens Park Community Organisation
Sam Conder	McMillan Welfare Support
Len Simkins	Advice Bedfordshire
Georgia Bowers	Bedford Libraries
Jade Gaynor	Bedford Borough Council
Sarah Hughes	Central Bedfordshire Council
Richard Skinner	Noah Enterprise
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Rawshana Noor	Disability Resource Centre Beds

Apologies:

Clare Anderson	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Steve Perry	Age UK Bedfordshire
Karen Perry	Age UK Bedfordshire
Brian Cunningham	BRASS

3. Minutes of last Forum meeting (30-06-2022) and matters arising

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

4. Cost of Living crisis – impact on advice services

Retention and recruitment of staff is an issue for some organisations.

Most services are very busy – but Money Advice at St Andrews (www.moneyadvicestandrews.org) still has capacity and happy to take referrals.

A number of organisations reported that they continue to support people to claim support that they are already entitled to, but were not aware of. Others reported issues with clients obtaining the energy costs rebate.

Jade Gaynor and Sarah Hughes updated the meeting on the use of the Household Support Fund and other sources of support via the local authorities. A copy of Jade's slides can be found at the end of these minutes.

Details can also be found on the website of the two local authorities:

- <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/grants-and-funding/help-cost-living>
- <https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/165/support-with-the-cost-of-living>

Amanda thanked Jade and Sarah for attending the meeting.

5. BAF Training

Len provided an update on training – Please see the slides attached to the end of these minutes.

It was proposed and agreed that:

- BAF will organise a free online workshop for BAF members on how to advise clients in the cost-of-living crisis – ideally this will be held before Christmas.
- BAF will apply for funding to arrange a comprehensive training programme.
- BAF will organise a training programme in 2023. (If funding is obtained, a comprehensive programme can be organised. However, a limited programme will still be arranged even if no funding is awarded)

The BAF Steering Group will look to action the above points.

6. Information Exchange

- BPHA still have some funding to assist some BPHA residents with rent arrears. Please contact Amanda if you have any clients that might be eligible - amanda.ryan@bpha.org.uk
- QPCO have a small amount of funding for a community interpreting service, and thanks to the Police and Crime Commissioner, a fund to support the immediate costs of someone escaping Domestic Abuse (overnight hotel, toiletries, etc). Also happy to support groups who are looking to reach the 'hard to reach' communities - gpcq.bedford@gmail.com
- Bedford Borough Libraries are part of the Warm Spaces network. <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/warm-spaces>. The service is keen for other organisations to come into the libraries to promote and offer relevant services - Georgia.Bowers@bedford.gov.uk
- McMillan Welfare Support are now back to face-to-face service delivery and are very busy.
- Grand Union Housing Group have a Financial Wellbeing team helping customers with welfare benefits and debt advice. More details at: <https://www.guhg.co.uk/helpadvice/benefit-and-money-advice-services/>
- Beds RCC have a network of Village and Community Agents <https://bedsrcc.org.uk/what-we-do/health-wellbeing/village-community-agents/> and Good Neighbour Schemes <https://bedsrcc.org.uk/what-we-do/health-wellbeing/good-neighbour/>
- Autism Bedfordshire are offering support for clients to access a range of benefits – clients do not have to be a member - wendy.jephcote@autismbeds.org
- Hightown Housing Association provided an overview of their services and the support they can provide to residents.
- Carers in Bedfordshire are holding a Carers Conference on 17th November at Kings House, Ampthill Road, Bedford - <https://carersinbeds.org.uk/conference/>

7. Mutual Assistance

All members were reminded that if they have any requests or offers, they should be free to share them with other members at any time, including at BAF meetings.

8. Update on BAF's other services and activities

Benefits Network

- A BBN meeting was held on 21st September.
- James Hurd has been elected as the Chair. Elliott has taken over from Len in facilitating the BBN meetings.
- A meeting to discuss Central Bedfordshire Council's proposed changes to their Council tax support scheme was attended by a number of BAF members.

Advice Bedfordshire - No income currently coming into the company and only a small amount of funds in the bank. The company remains in place if required.

BAF at 25 - Len has produced a short document setting out the achievements and highlights over the past 25 years. A copy will be circulated with the minutes.

9. Any other business

None

Dates of next meeting

- Thursday 23rd February 2023 - 10am – online

25 years of BAF

1997 – 2022

**Bedfordshire
Advice Forum**
Promoting and supporting advice and
information services in Bedfordshire

Highlights

- Over **85 Forum meetings** held for BAF members to discuss advice sector issues and provide networking opportunities (since 1997)
- Over **130 training courses and information sessions** organised for local advice sector staff and volunteers (since 1997)
- **18 major projects** managed for the local advice sector (since 2000)
- **26 Benefit Network meetings** arranged for local benefit advisers (since 2011)

History of BAF

BAF was founded in **July 1997** as **Bedford Advice Forum** to provide a support network for not-for-profit organisations giving social welfare advice and information in Bedford Borough. A key, initial focus for BAF was to provide low-cost training programmes for BAF members.

In **2001** BAF expanded to also cover the old Mid Bedfordshire area to tie in with BAF's membership of the new Mid and North Bedfordshire Community Legal Service Partnership.

In **2007** BAF changed its name to **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** and expanded its remit to also cover the old South Bedfordshire area – to promote the advice sector across the whole of Bedfordshire.

Since Local Government Re-organisation in **2009**, **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** has covered the two unitary local authority areas of Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire.



Celebrating BAF's
25th anniversary
at the BAF AGM

June 2022

Thanks

Thanks go to members of BAF's **Training Sub-Group** (1999-2004), BAF's **Steering Group** (2004-2022), and especially to the **BAF Officers** over 25 years.

Chairs

Helen Voce (1997-2001)

Diane Wynne-Powell (2002-2004)

Linda Wood (2004-2005)

David Verney (2005-2008 and
2015-2016)

Wendy Anderson-Welsh
(2008-2011)

Lorraine Gunther (2011-2013)

Fiona McLeod (2013-2015)

Amanda Ryan (2020-2022)

Secretaries

Annette Pacey (1998-2001)

Jennifer Wright (2001-2003)

Len Simkins (2004-2014)

Martin Trinder (2015-2022)

Treasurers / Financial Hosts

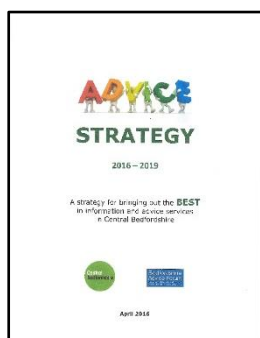
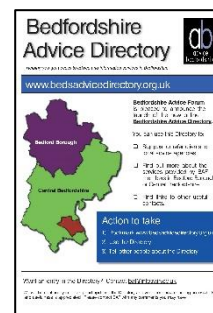
Mark Boscher – BHL (1998-2001)

Annette Pacey – BPHA (2002-2018)

Martin Trinder – CVS (2018-2022)

BAF projects and activities (2000-2010)

- Published 3 editions of the **Bedfordshire Advice Directory** (2000, 2003 and 2005)
- Organised 2-year **BAF-STEP** training and staff development project, funded by the ESF (2002-2004)
- Developed **NVQ training and support programme** for BAF members (2004-2006)
- Launched **3-year BAF Strategy** (2006)
- Set-up **Advice Bedfordshire CIC** as a trading company for BAF (2007)
- BAF joined **Voluntaryworks**, Bedfordshire's VCS infrastructure consortium (2008) – and worked on its Improving Reach, Transforming Local Infrastructure, and Building Better Opportunities (Financial Inclusion) projects (2008-2019)
- Developed and launched **BAF's website** (2008), which is now hosted by the CVS www.bedfordshireadviceforum.org.uk
- Managed **Research Project into links between advice agencies and children's centres** (2009)
- Launched the online **Bedfordshire Advice Directory** (2010), which was updated and used until 2017



BAF projects and activities (2010-2022)

- Led on the development of an **Advice Strategy for Bedford Borough** (2010) and managed the Advice Management Group to oversee the strategy (2011-2013)
- Led on the development of an **Advice Strategy for Central Bedfordshire** (2011) and managed the Advice Planning Board to oversee the strategy (2012-2016)
- Launched **Bedfordshire Benefits Network** for local benefit advisers (2011) – with 26 network meetings held (since 2011)
- Organised **Campaign to encourage volunteering in Central Bedfordshire advice agencies**, which built links with the local volunteer centres (2015)
- Developed **Advice Skills Project** offering a programme of training courses and a recognised NOCN qualification (2013-2014)
- Organised **Solicitors Project** to develop links between advice agencies and solicitors – including organising a webinar meeting (2012-2014)
- Led on the refresh of the **Central Bedfordshire Advice Strategy** (2016) and managed a new Advice Strategy Management Group to oversee the Delivery Plan for the new strategy (2016-2021)
- Organised various **Welfare Reform** training courses and other support initiatives (since 2011)
- Managed the **Building Better Opportunities Project** (2018-2019), on behalf of Voluntaryworks, which was funded by the Big Lottery Fund and the ESF
- Introduced **online meetings** for BAF and the Bedfordshire Benefits Network during the Covid pandemic (2020-2021)
- Organised **Online Training Project** to develop a programme of Universal Credit training for advisers during the Covid pandemic (2020-2021) – and then an online Overview of Universal Credit course for other staff (2021)

Remembering BAF colleagues

Balbir Dutt (2010) Rob Brady (2017) Annette Pacey (2018) Susannah Rastall (2020)

BAF TRAINING

Proposal – November 2022

Bedfordshire
Advice Forum





BAF TRAINING – PAST SITUATION

Over the last 25 years BAF has had a very good history of arranging high quality, low-cost training courses for BAF members.

Since its launch, BAF has provided over 120 training courses or workshops.

BAF has received various grants over the years enabling it to provide training free of charge to BAF members.

At other times BAF has provided courses at low cost through using a committed, local pool of trainers (offering their services on low fees, or sometimes no cost through the goodwill of their organisation).



BAF TRAINING – CURRENT SITUATION

BAF's current situation is quite worrying both financially and in terms of available trainers

BAF's finances are now fragile. BAF currently has no grant income and its reserves are steadily going down

Also BAF a decreasing number of regular trainers

This has resulted in no training being arranged since July 2021



BAF TRAINING – FUTURE PROPOSAL

BAF's Steering Group is now proposing that:

1. BAF should organise a **free workshop for BAF members** on how to advise clients in the cost-of-living crisis
2. BAF should **apply for funding** to arrange a comprehensive training programme
3. BAF should **organise a training programme** in 2023



COST OF LIVING WORKSHOP

- This workshop should be held as soon as possible
- As well attracting current members, the workshop could be promoted more widely to attract some new BAF members
- The workshop would cover good practice in advising clients in the current crisis and would also run through links to various funding/support, how to deal with rent arrears, and useful referrals for people on low incomes
- Amanda Ryan (BPHA) and Elliott Stephenson (Grand Union) will lead on the workshop



FUNDING BIDS

- A recent bid to BLCF's Stability Fund was refused – as the top priority for funding was frontline work to tackle poverty rather than staff training
- Funding applications should be made to other funders to organise a comprehensive training programme
- Funding bids could link the proposed training programme to the cost of living crisis
- Potential funders could include: the two local councils (BBC and CBC); The Harpur Trust; National Lottery (Awards for All).



2023 TRAINING PROGRAMME

- If new funding is available, a comprehensive training programme could be arranged covering a wide range of courses – possibly held throughout the year
- If no extra funding is available, a short training programme should still be arranged – early in 2023
 - A pool of local trainers would need to be recruited and briefed/supported
 - BAF already has a list of suggested training that is needed. Trainers could choose their preferred course
 - BAF also has some courses “on the shelf” that could be used, if needed

Household Support Fund

April 22 to September 22-
Phase 2

Funding distributed April – September

Supermarket Food Vouchers

Children's services distributed food vouchers to use at supermarkets for all children identified as being in receipt of income-related free school meals. Vouchers were given for the non academic weeks where children were not attending school to ensure that their parent/guardian were able to provide the child(ren) with a hot meal that they would have had if they were attending their place of education.

Funding distributed April – September

Financial Assistance

Households who were in receipt of a current Council Tax Support Claim were eligible to apply for a one off cash sum to assist with the current cost of living crisis.

This was mostly administered by way of an application received by qualifying households. All households were identified and a letter sent out with details on how to apply.

The grant funding from Central Government dictated that a percentage proportion went to those who were of pensionable age.

We managed to automatically pay those households that had previously applied in Phase 1 and were still eligible.

Funding distributed April – September 22

Statistics – Phase 2

- £633,486 paid out to eligible families for Free School Meals
- £269,675 paid to qualifying households on Council Tax Support

Category	Number of households	Amount
Pension Age with 100% CTS - £175	1298	£227,150
Pension Age with any % CTS - £75	567	£45,525
Working Age with 100% CTS - £50	2471	£123,550
Total spend		£269,675

- 1863 additional payments to pensioners of £62.00 per household for the remaining fund of the balance was paid towards the end of the scheme. Total spend was £385,181

Funding distributed April – September 22

Total funds spent to Bedford Borough residents

- £633,486 paid out to eligible families for Free School Meals
- £269,675 paid to qualifying households on Council Tax Support

Category	Amount
Free School Meals	£633,486
Financial Assistance to Low Income households	£385,181
Total spend	£1,018,667

Household Support Fund

October 22 – March 23

Phase 3

The expectation is that the Fund should be used to support households in the most need; particularly those who may not be eligible for the other support government has recently made available but who are nevertheless in need.

We are awaiting further guidance for what our Local criteria may be.

Other financial assistance for Bedford Borough Residents.

Discretionary Energy Rebates

The Council have offered residents that were not eligible for the main scheme the opportunity to apply for £150 Energy Rebate.

Those eligible, are residents that occupy a band E – H property **and** that have an active Council Tax Support Claim or those that have moved into a Band A-D between 01/04/22 and 01/08/22. All of those residents that were identified as being eligible have been notified by letter and asked to make an application. – This deadline has now passed.

Sustainable Warmth

a new government grant scheme designed to fund energy-efficiency upgrades for residents who are most likely to be impacted by the high cost of rising bills. These improvements will help residents to use less energy and spend less on their energy bills

Discretionary Housing Payments

Further financial assistance to help meet peoples rent, provided that they are already entitled to some Housing Benefit or housing costs element of Universal Credit.

A discretionary housing payment can be requested for any reason that makes it difficult for someone to meet their rent.

Crisis or emergency grants

If you are on a low income and have an unexpected crisis or an emergency the Council may be able to help with a crisis grant.

URL for our Cost of Living page - [Help with the cost of living | Bedford Borough Council](#)