

Present:

Amanda Ryan	BPHA (chair)
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Justine Hunt	Beds Rural Communities Charity
Pat Bonnett	CBC – Tenant support team
Karen Lister	Salvation Army
Anna Fitzgerald	CBC Senior Income Manager
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Support Group
Fran Marritt	Citizens Advice Bedford
Georgia Bowers	Bedford Borough Library Service
Sam Conder	McMillan Welfare Support
Brian Cunningham	BRASS
Debra	MIND
Melanie Gomez	Hightown Housing Association
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Len Simkins	Advice Bedfordshire
Chiara Mac Call	Queens Park Community Organisation
Sarah Hughes	Central Bedfordshire Council
Kash Karimzandi	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Veron Mason	

Apologies:

Rawshana Noor	Disability Resource Centre
Beccy Campbell-Grieve	Project 229
Steven Kunes	Hightown Housing Association

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

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

Amanda highlighted the sad news that Money Advice at St Andrews has now ceased operating.

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

4. Information Exchange

BPHA - Amanda

- Super busy with referrals.
- Current recruiting for new staff.
- £500,000 of funding has been secured to assist BPHA clients with rent arrears. Please do refer any clients to the service if you feel they are eligible.

GUHG - Elliott

- The service remains very busy, with referrals continuing to increase.
- A new member staff starting after Easter, replacing a member of staff who left.
- Increasing service charges, due to the cost of energy, are an issue for some residents.
- Recruiting for an Apprentice Debt Advisor shortly.

BRCC - Justine

- New Community Agent will commence work in April, focusing on those in town centre area affected by the cost of living crisis.

CBC Tenancy Support Team - Pat

- The service is very busy, with around 30 referrals a month.
- The lack of a furniture scheme in the Dunstable/South Bedfordshire area is an ongoing challenge.

Salvation Army - Karen

- One of the volunteers at Money Advice at St Andrews is now volunteering at the service.
- The service is currently recruiting to allow it to move from 3 to 5 days a week.

Bedford Community Self-help Group - Paulette

- Limited activity currently due to venue issues

Citizens Advice Bedford - Fran

- Welcome to Fran!
- 150 new debt clients in February, which is double the expected number.
- Dedicated advisor at Bedford Foodbank in place, which is working well.
- Volunteer team has been increased from 12 to 20 volunteers.
- Keen to hear from organisations who want to work in partnership.

Bedford Borough Libraries - Georgia

- The warm spaces initiative is almost finished, but libraries are still there as a community hub.
- Numerous children's events being held to encourage early engagement with the library service.
- Ongoing IT sessions in the libraries to offer people support and guidance.
- Happy to hear from others who wish to promote their services in the libraries.

Macmillan - Sam

- Current operating with 40-50 people waiting list, which equates to a 4 week waiting period.
- Sam is going part-time, so look out for a 2-day week post being advertised soon.
- A new full-time post is also due to be advertised soon.
- The service can still offer to small grants for individuals.

Bedford Foodbank – Sarah

- The service has seen a 69% increase in demand, which it is currently managing, but that may be difficult to sustain in the long term.

BRASS - Brian

- Drop in and advice sessions, English lessons, and social activities all continued be offered.
- Brian is keeping a close watch on the establishment of an asylum 'hotel' near Sharnbrook, and the support that residents might need. There are limited local services nearby, and almost no public transport links to/from the site.

MIND - Debra

- The peer support groups across the county are very popular.
- Crisis café open every day in Bedford, and part time centres are opening or already open in Biggleswade and Houghton Regis (but no longer at Flitwick).
- Opening soon - Young Person's Sanctuary – aimed at ages 14-17yrs, open 4pm - 10pm, at locations at Bedford, Luton, and Leighton Buzzard.

Hightown Housing Association - Melanie

- The Financial Inclusion and Tenancy Sustainability Team are working hard to cope with demand.

Citizens Advice Leighton Linslade - Kash

- The service consists of two full-time and five part-time staff.
- Volunteer numbers are only 50% of pre-pandemic numbers.
- More clients are presenting with multiple issues, which is very resource intensive.

Autism Beds – Wendy

- Wendy continues to support Autism Bedfordshire clients to claim any benefits and any other support that they might be entitled to.

QPCO - Chiara

- A number of projects operating, including:
- Domestic abuse project – providing the gap between someone leaving abuse and finding alternative accommodation. Often the service only needs to be involved for a day or two.
- Community Interpreting Service, which is phone based.
- Fitness classes at Kings Oak school for all ages and abilities.
- Drop in sessions with Carers in Bedfordshire.

CVS Beds – Martin

- Funding and development workshops - <https://cvsbeds.org.uk/news/2023/01/26/funding-and-development-workshops-2023/>
- Funding Fayre (13-15 March), with local funders on the 13th March - <https://cvsbeds.org.uk/news/2023/01/10/2023-funding-fair-online/>
- The Big Help Out – which is a volunteer recruitment day as part of the Coronation Celebrations - <https://thebighelpout.org.uk/>
- Food providers meeting -Monday 27th March at 10am, CVS Offices – following the Community Network there was felt a need to bring food related organisations operating in the Bedford area together. Contact Martin for more information.

5. 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.

6. BAF Training

BAF will be planning some training courses in 2023. The first courses will be in the spring, and then some further courses will be held in autumn. We will use a pool of experienced trainers to run the courses. The training programme will be self-funding. Full day courses will cost £75. Our local courses are very good value compared to the £200+ cost of most courses currently on offer in London.

We have also applied to Beds and Luton Community Foundation for some funding from the Frank Branston Charitable Trust to help pay for some of the training programme. If this grant application is successful, we will be able to reduce the course fees to £25.

Please contact Len Simkins (BAF Training Facilitator) for further information.
len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

7. Update on BAF's other services and activities including:

BAF webpages

BAF's webpages are hosted on the CVS website. <https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/baf/>

The webpages are currently being updated. If you have any comments about the webpages, please contact Len Simkins len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

These network meetings, for benefit advisers, are provided as an extra service by BAF. They are generally very well attended with an average attendance of about 20 per meeting.

The next BBN meeting will be on Wednesday 15th March at Bunyan Meeting in Bedford. As well as the usual benefit updates, there will be a speaker from Atos giving a presentation on the assessments for Personal Independence Payments. Please contact Elliott Stephenson (BBN Facilitator) for further information. elliottstephenson@yahoo.com

Advice Bedfordshire CIC

Advice Bedfordshire is BAF's trading company, and is used in BAF's project and training work. The current balance in the Company's account is £8.36. Please contact Len Simkins (AB's Company Secretary) for further information. len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Googlegroups Network.

Martin is keen to get members using the network to quickly share information with each other, so the following will happen:

- An email reminder to all BAF members will be sent out, with details for those not already signed up on how to do so.
- Weekly postings on the Googlegroup network from CVS for at least a month, to encourage people to start using the system, and to also identify if people are not receiving the messages due to spam settings, etc.

8. Any other business

The Central Bedfordshire Council VCS Cost of Living grant scheme was highlighted. Deadline 10th March. Details can be found here -

https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/42/stronger_communities/678/community_grants/7

Dates of next meeting

Dates of future forum meetings: All 10am start:

- Thursday 29th June 2023 (AGM) - in person
- Thursday 2nd November 2023 - online
- Thursday 29th February 2024 - online