

Present:

Elliott Stephenson	Amplius
Michaela Martindale	FACES
Mohammad Akhtar	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Karen Sharp	Beds RCC
Amanda Higham	Beds RCC
Len Simkins	Advice Bedfordshire
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Brian Cunningham	BRASS
Gill Eden	Salvation Army Debt Advice Service
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Self-Help Group
Liz Barker	Central Bedfordshire Council - Housing Team
Kash Prashad	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade

Apologies:

Fran Marritt	Citizens Advice Bedford
Sarah Broughton	Bedford Foodbank
Steven Kunes	Hightown Housing Association
Heidi Schuricht	Sight Concern Bedfordshire

In Fran's absence, due to a family bereavement, Elliott chaired the meeting.

3. Minutes of last Forum meeting (12-11-24) and matters arising

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

4 Poverty Discussion

Partners shared information and data with each other. The main points are summarised below:

- Demand for services clearly increasing, whilst many organisations are suffering from a reduction in grant funding, and an increase in costs relating to cost of living, increased employers national insurance, etc.
- In-work poverty is now a common issue - a significant number of people seeking support are already in work, but their income does not cover basic outgoings.
- Housing – the cost and availability of housing is now a major issue. Organisations are seeing a large proportion of clients with issues relating to rent, utilities, temporary accommodation, and other housing related issues. Partners also reported some issues with housing applications having to be made online, which is a real issue for those people that only have a basic mobile phone and cannot access the internet properly.
- Foodbanks – an increasing number of clients are using food banks and similar services to make ends meet.
- Crisis funding - A number of schemes have closed, and the remaining services are running out of funds earlier than previous years.

5. Update on proposed Anti-Poverty Network

Len had provided a written update in his report (below). A Planning Group has been formed, and it is hoped that an event will be organised towards the end of June or early July. Other members are welcome to join the Planning Group.

6. Information Exchange

Members provided an update on their respective services.

All members are invited to share information on their services via the Googlegroups system, or by forwarding details to Martin.

Elliott - Amplius

- Formally Grand Union Housing Group, the organisation now has housing from Grimsby to Luton.
- The team are dealing mainly with benefits advice, debt advice and hardship situations.

Liz - Central Bedfordshire Council - Housing Team

- Some staffing issues, so the remaining team are working hard to keep up with the workload.

Michaela - FACES

- Warms spaces initiative funded via Cadent for 15 months.
- Partnership Tuesdays – drop in sessions attended by a range of local services.
- Housing related issues have significantly increased.

Karen and Amanda - Beds RCC

- Moving into new Winter Warmth roles, focusing in Central Bedfordshire, offering a mixture of advice, signposting, and vouchers.

Mohammad - Macmillan Welfare Rights Service.

- The staff team are back to full capacity, and busy, but please do refer people to the service
- Mohammed is mostly based at Bedford Daycare Hospice.

Brian - BRASS

- Drop in sessions, mostly on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursdays – please do signpost people to the services.
- Overall the services are very busy.

Gill - Salvation Army Debt Advice Service

- Appointment only service, with a small waiting list, but please do refer people.
- The Referral form will be circulated with the minutes.

Kash - Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade

- Service mostly operates by phone and in-person by appointment only, but looking to expand the drop-in service element. Still battling to replace experienced volunteers who stepped back during Covid-19.
- Service is very inundated with requests for support.

Paulette - Bedford Community Self-Help Group

- Working to re-establish a number of services in the near future.

7. Mutual Assistance

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

8. Update on BAF activities, including BAF training.

Len provided a written update (see below).

Training Courses – Unfortunately, one course had to be cancelled due to lack of numbers. The Universal Credit course is now open for bookings.

9. Any other business

Karen asked about other organisations joining the network. It was suggested that they look at the website (<https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/baf/>) and then get in contact with Martin.

Future Forum meetings – It was agreed to continue with the existing format of two online meetings per year and one in-person meeting per year, which will consist of the AGM and a regular Forum meeting. Martin will prepare dates for the next 12 months, but members will be asked again at the in-person meeting.

Update on BAF projects and activities

Anti-Poverty Network

Driven by the national cost-of-living crisis and increasing poverty figures, BAF has been discussing the possibility of starting a new anti-poverty network.

A presentation was given on this at the BAF Forum meeting in February 2024, and a BAF sub-group was set up to discuss initial plans. Recommendations from the sub-group were then presented at the BAF Forum meeting in November, where it was decided to support the development of a new anti-poverty network in Bedford by forming a planning group.

The first meeting of the Anti-Poverty Planning Group was held on 21st January and was attended by representatives from Advice Bedfordshire, Bedford Foodbank, Big Local, Citizens Advice Bedford, CVS and FACES.

It was agreed that the main purpose of the planning group would be to plan an event to encourage local stakeholders to join a new anti-poverty network, which would be a strategic group covering Bedford Borough. The event, and launch of the new network would hopefully coincide with the launch of the Government's Child Poverty Strategy in the spring.

Although, initially the planning group were thinking that a standalone event would be needed, after discussion, it was agreed that the event could possibly be one of the regular events organised by the local Community Network, which is supported by the Borough Council. This would make the whole event planning procedure easier, and would have the benefit of a free venue and direct, practical support from the Council.

This proposal from the planning group has subsequently been agreed by the Community Network. The latest news is that the national Child Poverty Strategy will be launched in late June, so it is hoped that our local event could be held in early July.

The next meeting of the Anti-Poverty Planning Group is on 25th March.

BAF training

BAF has been running a variety of courses as part of its **2024/25 training programme**.

I reported back on the **first element of the programme** at the Forum meeting in June. This element covered 3 online courses: "Overview of Universal Credit; "Introduction to housing status"; and "Universal Credit – Managed Migration", which were held in April and May 2024. 41 people attended these courses.

The **second element of the training** was BAF's Advice Skills programme (consisting of 3 sessions: "Introduction to advice work and advice skills"; "Client interviewing skills"; and "Advice recording skills"), which was held in September and October 2024. A group of 7 people signed up the programme, with 18 training places filled. I reported back on this element of the programme at the last Forum meeting in November. Feedback from participants was very positive.

The **final element of the training programme** consists of 3 training courses in early 2025.

Course	Date	Bookings	Attendance
Introduction to benefits	29/1/25	9	9
Personal Independence Payment	25/2/25	4	Cancelled
Universal Credit	12/3/25 and 13/3/25	4	TBC
Totals		17	9

Unfortunately, and surprisingly, initial bookings for all 3 courses were very low.

With some last minute, extra publicity we managed to finally get 9 bookings for the “**Introduction to benefits**” course to make it viable to go ahead. The feedback from participants was very positive. Thanks very much to the trainer, Dean Crofts.

However, despite extra publicity, we were unable to get enough bookings for the “**Personal Independence Payment**” course, and we had to cancel the session because we would have made a loss in running it for only 4 people.

Bookings for the last course in the programme, **Universal Credit**, are also very low. Again, we are undertaking some extra publicity for this course. We need to have 8 bookings to make it financially viable to run.

Please contact Len Simkins (Training Consultant) for information on the Universal Credit course len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

These network meetings, for benefit advisers, are provided as an extra service by BAF. They are held every 6 months and are generally very well attended.

The **next BBN meeting** will be at 10.00am on **Wednesday 19th March 2025** at FACES in Bedford.

Please contact **Elliott Stephenson (BBN Facilitator)** for further information about the BBN meetings. elliott@estephenon.co.uk

Advice Bedfordshire

Advice Bedfordshire is BAF’s trading company, and is used to organise BAF’s projects and training work. The Company is currently organising BAF’s 2024/25 training programme.

The current balance in the bank account is **£1,638.21**. It should be noted that the finances from the 2024/25 training programme have not been finalised yet, so the balance will be much lower, when all the expenses have been paid.

BAF webpages

BAF’s webpages, which contain various information on BAF and its activities, are hosted on the CVS website. <https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/baf/>

If you have any comments on the webpages, please contact **Len Simkins**: len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Len Simkins – Project Consultant

27/2/25