

## Minutes of Forum Meeting

26<sup>th</sup> November 2020

### Present:

Elliott Stephenson  
Len Simkins  
Martin Trinder  
Amanda Ryan  
Sam Condor  
Brian Cunningham

Grand Union Housing Group  
Autism Bedfordshire  
CVS Beds  
BPHA Ltd (chair)  
Macmillan Welfare Rights Service  
BRASS

### Apologies

Georgia Bowers  
Carol Weston  
Maureen Sheridan  
Chera Gilbert  
Sarah Broughton

Bedford Borough Libraries  
Money Advice at St Andrews  
Sight Concern Bedfordshire  
Disability Resource Centre  
Bedford Foodbank

---

### Action

---

**2** Apologies for absence were noted (listed above).

---

### **3 Minutes of last Forum meeting (15<sup>th</sup> September) and Matters Arising**

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

Membership – 14 members have renewed this year – Martin is chasing other members.

Sylvia McDowell has now stepped down from Money Advice at St Andrews. The group thanked her for her support over the years.

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

---

### **4 Information Exchange - including the impact on your services of the 2nd lockdown.**

**Sam** - Brief period of being back at Primrose Unit between lockdowns, but otherwise working from home. The project is not likely to have any office space at Priory House going forward.

**Elliott** - Home visits are still being conducted where considered necessary. Most staff remain working from home.

**Len** - Still working from home. Short break clubs for disabled children have re-opened. Autism Beds is now delivering a number of remote services including an online conference this week.

**Brian** - The office was opened briefly between lockdown, but staff are now working from home unless absolutely necessary. A new benefits advisor and a new refugee family support worker have been appointed.

**Martin** - CVS staff continue to work at home, with a skeleton staff operating the office. CVS are actively involved in discussing volunteer needs for mass testing and mass vaccination.

**Amanda** – BPHA staff are working from home and are likely to do so for the foreseeable. Staff have been having ‘teams’ day, where they replicate the office experience virtually, by having teams running in the background for a couple of hours.

---

---

## **5 Wishlist - what do organisations need?**

Amanda explained that members should feel free to highlight at future meetings any issues that they are facing, and if they need any assistance. This could be items of equipment, small amounts of funding, or help responding to an issue etc. Other partner organisations may be able to assist with some requests.

It was agreed that 'Mutual Assistance' will be a standing item on future agenda.

---

## **6 BAF's online training programme**

BAF has been applying for some funding to prepare and deliver online training courses.

The BLCF application discussed at the last meeting had to be withdrawn as the terms of the grant were going to be too restrictive. However, a smaller bid was submitted to the Harpur Trust. This was successful, but the majority of places will need to be allocated to those operating in the Bedford Borough area.

- A series of Universal Credit training sessions, are being planned for January.
- Len will prepare an email to send to members to consult on the dates, etc.
- Courses will only be open to paid-up members of BAF.
- A shorter course for other staff (including school -based staff) is also being considered.

---

## **7 Update on BAF's other services and activities**

A full report can be found attached to these minutes.

It will be proposed that the next Benefits Network meeting (10<sup>th</sup> December) is postponed until the new year.

---

## **8 Any other business**

- It was noted that the Bedford Borough Council are no longer offering payroll services from 1<sup>st</sup> April. A list of potential alternative providers is on the CVS website.
- BRASS is looking for new trustees – anybody interested should contact Brian.
- All partners were asked to consider potential speakers for future meetings.

---

## **Future meeting dates**

The next meeting will be in March – To be confirmed.

---

Documents discussed at this meeting can be found at [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

# UPDATE REPORT FOR FORUM MEETING

## Update on BAF projects

### BAF training

In August, BAF's Steering Group set up a Sub-Group to look into BAF developing some online training – as face-to-face training has been postponed this year because of the Coronavirus crisis, and there is still no certainty on when it will be realistic to start running physical training courses again.

At the last Forum meeting we reported that Advice Bedfordshire (BAF's trading company) had applied for a £10,000 grant from Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation under its latest Covid-19 grant funding. This funding was actually provided by central government, through the DCMS, and it became apparent that there were lots of barriers involved in receiving the funding. Therefore, after discussions with BLCF and BAF's Steering Group, it was decided to withdraw the application.

However, in September we applied for funding from the Harpur Trust (in Bedford) and were successfully awarded a £2,000 grant from its Small Grants Programme. The funding was formally agreed in October. The grant is to develop and run a Universal Credit training programme consisting of 4 online sessions – specifically aimed at advisers from organisations working in Bedford Borough.

The plan for the Universal Credit programme is:

- **4 online sessions (using Microsoft Teams)**
  - Session 1: UC - Background and overview
  - Session 2: UC - Calculations
  - Session 3: UC - Claims and payments
  - Session 4: UC - Issues and disputes
- **Sessions to be held in January 2021.** Suggested dates are:
  - Session 1: Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> January (10.00am – 11.30am)
  - Session 2: Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> January (10.00am – 12.30pm)
  - Session 3: Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> January (10.00am – 11.30am)
  - Session 4: Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January (10.00am – 11.30am)
- **Tutors**
  - Elliott Stephenson – Lead tutor
  - Len Simkins – Support tutor and administrative support
- **Publicity** for the programme will go out in early December
- Places will be **free of charge** but will only be open to advisers from paid up BAF member organisations.
- **Maximum places** on each session will be 20. Of these, 15 places will initially be reserved for advisers from organisations that work in Bedford Borough. 5 places (or any places not taken by BB advisers) will then be available for advisers from organisations that only work in Central Bedfordshire
- Participants can book on all 4 sessions or any combination of individual sessions. But **priority will be given to people booking all 4 sessions.**

- **Sessions will be recorded** so that participants who have booked can view a session later, if they are unable to attend for some reason.

## **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.

There is no further news at the moment on when the next meeting of the Advice Strategy Management Group will be held. It is still very difficult to discuss longer-term plans.

## **Bedfordshire Benefits Network**

The next online meeting of the BBN was scheduled for 10.00 on 10<sup>th</sup> December.

However, we are proposing to postpone this meeting because there have not been any major benefit updates recently and the anticipated spike in redundancies (and benefit claims) has not happened in December due to the extension of the Government’s furlough scheme,

## **Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group**

I represent BAF at IPAG meetings. IPAG meetings had been postponed during the Coronavirus crisis but started again (online) in October.

The next meeting is on 3<sup>rd</sup> December. IPAG is continuing to make plans for a School Uniform Exchange Project.

## **Voluntaryworks Consortium**

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

VW Ltd’s Building Better Opportunities Project (which was directly supported by BAF / Advice Bedfordshire) is currently being audited by the Big Lottery.

## **Advice Bedfordshire**

There has been no activity in the Advice Bedfordshire bank account since the last BAF meeting apart from a payment of £0.06 for bank interest.

The current bank balance is **£209.32**.

Len Simkins – BAF Project Consultant  
26/11/20