

Present:

Francesca Marritt	Citizens Advice Bedford (chair)
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Jo Rogers	FACES
Caroline Cook	Mind BLMK
Liz Barker	Housing Team - Central Bedfordshire Council
Sam Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Karen Sharp	Beds RCC
Steven Kunes	Hightown Housing Association
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Taiwo Adaba	Autism Bedfordshire
Nathan Kirkwood	Citizens Advice Bedford
Clare Anderson	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Sarah Broughton	Bedford Foodbank
Len Simkins	Advice Bedfordshire
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Support Group/MENTER
Kuldip Rupra	MENTER

Apologies:

Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Julie Balaam	Beds RCC
Georgia Bowers	Bedford Libraries - Bedford Borough Council
Nichola Thompson	Hightown Housing Association
Melanie Gomez	Hightown Housing Association
Pat Bonnett	Central Bedfordshire Council
Sarah Hughes	Central Bedfordshire Council
Amanda Higham	Beds RCC
Brian Cunningham	BRASS

2. Minutes of last Forum meeting (29-02-24) and matters arising

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

Item 5 – Anti-poverty network - An informal meeting is being organised to discuss this further, involving Len, Sarah, Martin, Nathan and Fran.

3. Information Exchange

Sarah - Bedford Foodbank

<https://bedford.foodbank.org.uk>

Have been working with the council to ensure that those in temporary accommodation have access to at least a microwave, and not just a kettle.

Sam – Macmillan

https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/18/health_and_social_care/324/macmillan_welfare_rights_service_central_bedfordshire

A new member of staff starting in August. A 4-6 week waiting times for most referrals. Small grants (£200) can be applied for on behalf of clients.

Clare - Sight Concern

<https://www.sightconcern.org.uk/our-services/>

An Impairment Advisor will be starting soon, who will be able to make home visits, to discuss benefits, etc. Please also make contact if you are seeking visual impairment training.

Karen – Beds RCC

<https://bedsrcc.org.uk/what-we-do/health-wellbeing/village-community-agents/>

Village Agents operating in a number of areas in the county, offering some benefits advice and referring people to other services.

Wendy - Autism Bedfordshire

<https://www.autismbedfordshire.net/>

Wendy is retiring soon. Taiwo will be taking over Wendy's role in the coming weeks. Best wishes were given to Wendy for her retirement and Taiwo was welcomed into BAF.

Caroline - Mind BLMK

<https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/how-we-can-help/>

A range of services available, which are available on the website.

Most Crisis Cafes are open every day - details on website - <https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/how-we-can-help/crisis-support/crisis-cafe/>

Nathan - Citizens Advice Bedford

<https://bedfordcab.org.uk/services/>

A range of outreach services are now on offer – Rural outreach remains a challenge.

Paulette/Kuldip - Bedford Community Support Group/MENTER

Paulette and Kuldip explained the history of Minority Ethnic Network Eastern Region, and their hopes to expand again in the coming years. Kuldip was welcomed to the BAF meeting. It was agreed that MENTER, as a network which includes some local information and advice providers, would be eligible to join BAF.

Martin - CVS

The Bedford Borough Food Providers Network has produced a who does what list, which is available on the CVS website: <https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/foodprovidersinbedfordborough>

4. 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.

5. Update on BAF activities, including BAF training.

Len provided a written update (see attached).

6. Any other business

Potential topics for future forum meetings were discussed.

- Older people
- Rural issues
- Green/environment
- Digital exclusion

The steering group will use these proposals to plan future meetings.

Date of future meetings

All 10.30am start:

- Tuesday 12th November 2024 - virtual
- Thursday 27th February 2025 – virtual

Update on BAF projects and activities

BAF training

Following discussions at the last Forum meeting in February, we moved ahead to finalise the plans for BAF's 2024 training programme.

The agreed aim was to organise a varied programme of training sessions throughout the year including:

- Some full day courses and some shorter sessions;
- A mixture of content-based and advice skills courses;
- A mixture of introductory and more advanced courses;
- Most courses would be face-to-face but some online sessions should also be considered.

We originally wanted to run our own "Overview of housing rights course" but took the opportunity to link in with Shelter who were offering a free webinar "Introduction to Housing Status", which we then added to BAF's programme.

The planned timetable for the 2024 programme was:

Course	Level	Date	Length	Tutor (Potential)
Overview of Universal Credit	Introductory	April	Half-day	Elliott Stephenson
Introduction to Housing Status	Introductory	May	1.5 hours	Shelter
Universal Credit – Managed Migration	Intermediate	May	Half-day	Elliott Stephenson
Advice Skills Programme (4 sessions)	Introductory	June / July (Postponed)	3 half-days & 1 full-day	Karen Banfield
Introduction to Benefits	Introductory	Autumn	Full-day	Dean Crofts
Personal Independence Payment	Intermediate	Autumn	Full-day	Karen Banfield
Universal Credit	Intermediate	Autumn	2 half-days	Elliott Stephenson

Notes

- The first 3 courses above were online courses – the rest are face-to-face training
- We have not organised a date yet for the planned "Overview of Bereavement Benefits" course

Bookings for the three online courses in the spring went reasonably well – and we will make a small surplus on the fee-paying training so far.

Course	Date	Bookings	Attendance
Overview of Universal Credit	24/5/24	15	14
Introduction to Housing Status (Free webinar)	16/5/24	22	16
Universal Credit – Managed Migration	22/5/24	12	11

A big thank you should go to Elliott Stephenson who presented the two Universal Credit courses.

Unfortunately, we had to postpone the **advice skills programme** planned for June/July because of low bookings and the risk of the programme making a loss. However, we will now plan again to try to run the programme after the summer holidays (on 17/9, 24/9 and 1/10), using wider advertising and reducing the number of training sessions in the programme from four to three.

The three other courses in the training programme will then be held later in the year.

Please contact Len Simkins (Training Consultant) for any information on the training programme: 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 18th September** at FACES, 147 Church Lane, Bedford.

Please contact Elliott Stephenson (BBN Facilitator) for further information about the BBN. elliottstephenson@yahoo.com

Advice Bedfordshire CIC

Advice Bedfordshire is BAF's trading company, and is used to organise BAF's projects and training work - and the Company is organising BAF's 2024 training programme.

The AGM for the Company was held yesterday. 2023/24 was a good year with the Company organising 2 BBN meetings and a very successful training programme for BAF. The surplus made from the training programme enabled the Company to pay BAF a management fee of £150. The Company was also able to pay all the costs of running the BBN last year, which saved BAF £770. The Company assets brought over to 2024/25 were £9.72.

The current balance in the Company bank account is £1,148.72.

Please contact Len Simkins (AB's Company Secretary) for further information about the Company, and/or a copy of the Company's Annual Report for 2023/24. len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

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 about the webpages, please contact Len Simkins: len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

Len Simkins – Project Consultant