

Present:

Francesca Marritt	Citizens Advice Bedford
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Chiara Mac Call	QPCO
Michaela Martindale	FACES
Adam Wilson	Noah Enterprise
Kash Karimzandi	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Clare Anderson	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Sam Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Debra Brewster	Mind BLMK
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group (Deputy Chair)
Gill Eden	Debt Advice Service – Salvation Army Bedford
Kate Fraiel	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council
Len Simkins	Advice Bedfordshire
Melanie Gomez	Hightown Housing Association
Nichola Thompson	Hightown Housing Association
Pat Bonnet	Central Bedfordshire Council - Tenancy Support
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Support Group
Sarah Broughton	Bedford Foodbank
Steven Kunes	Hightown Housing Association
Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Brian Cunningham	BRASS

Apologies:

Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Gemma McLean	Beds Rural Communities Charity
Clare Copleston	The Disability Resource Centre

3. Minutes of last Forum meeting (2-11-23) and matters arising

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed.

4. Main Discussion Item – Cost of Living

Elliott and Fran led the discussion, with numerous members contributing their experiences and knowledge. Key points included:

- Increase of complexity of cases for most organisations.
- People struggling to live on their income even when they have claimed everything they are entitled to.
- Limited resources within providers to offer support (such as some emergency grants being reduced from £1,000 to £200).
- A significant rise in child mental health referrals.
- Housing issues – waiting lists for temporary accommodation, and a spike of people at risk of becoming homeless due to being no recourse to public funds.

5. Discussion regarding an Anti-Poverty Network

Len made a presentation on the history of local anti-poverty networks over the past 20 years, and the potential role of a new network in the future. The presentation is attached to these minutes.

There was common agreement for the need for the network, but concerns over the capacity of anyone to facilitate the network. Fran, Len and Martin will meet to discuss the options, and assess any opportunity to secure funding to support such a network.

6. Information Exchange

Sam and Kate - Macmillan

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

Last year's annual report highlighted that £5.4m was secured for clients, with approximately 1,400 people being supported last year. Small grants (£200) can be applied for on behalf of clients.

Paulette - Bedford Community Support Group

Hoping to restart activities in the summer.

Wendy - Autism Bedfordshire

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

Many more members are losing their benefits, so staff are working hard to support clients. The Harpur Trust continue to support the provision of the benefit services.

Debra - MIND

<https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/>

The young people sanctuaries have now had to close due to a lack of funding.

Adam - Noah

<http://www.noahenterprise.org/>

The service is reporting an uptake in rough sleepers. The numbers appear to be back to 2019 levels.

Pat - Tenancy Support – Central Bedfordshire Council

https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/74/housing/1428/supporting_our_tenants

The service is seeing clients with more complex issues, including mental health. Becoming more challenging to get the evidence required to access support.

Len – Advice Bedfordshire

Recently attended the Bedford Ukrainian Forum, representing BAF. Approximately 400 people came to Bedford, with around 300 still here, and 50% with hosts, and the rest in private accommodation. Partners are starting to see more Ukrainians accessing services.

Steve/Melanie/Nichola - Hightown

<https://www.hightownha.org.uk/my-home/support-and-advice/>

The service is seeing more complex cases.

Elliott - Grand Union Housing Group

https://www.guhg.co.uk/help-advice/benefit_and_money_advice-services/

The debt advice service is oversubscribed, so are not taking any new cases at present. Welfare Benefits Advice continues to be available to GUHG customers as normal.

Michaela – FACES

<https://www.facesbedford.org/>

The level of demand for support remains very high.

Kash – Citizens Advice Leighton Linslade

<https://www.leightonlinsladecab.org.uk/>

As with most other services the demand and the complexity of cases is increasing.

- Housing (cost and availability) is a big issue for many clients.
- Digital exclusion is also a challenge, especially for clients trying to access local authority services.

Chiara - QPCO

<https://qpc.org.uk/>

Small team working with a large demand for their support. Language is a huge barrier for many clients, with limited access to translation/interpreting services.

Sarah - Bedford Foodbank

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

- New warehouse opened to allow volunteers to operate safely and respond to the increased demand. Ongoing close working with CAB to support clients to access other support.
- Working with Ethnic Foodbank and Red Cross and FACES (Baby Bank).
- People are struggling to cook food. Some fuel vouchers available.
- Parcels for those in temporary accommodation a real challenge.

Brian - BRASS

www.brassbedford.org.uk

- The service is very busy, with 376 clients supported last year.
- A number of clients are now receiving refugee status relatively quickly, which means that they need to move out of certain accommodation quickly, creating pressure on other parts of the housing system – only those with children/special needs can apply to the council for support.

Martin - CVS

<https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/>

Funding Fayre - <https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/news/2024/01/17/2024-funding-fair-online/>

Directory of Networks - <https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/networks>

Flitwick Town Council are offering community groups the opportunity to hold drop in or information sessions at the HUB in Flitwick. The HUB is available on Wednesday's 9am – 5pm, from April 2024. The sessions can be morning or afternoon. Contact Sue Quinn (communityservices@flitwick.gov.uk)

BPHA

<https://www.bpha.org.uk/your-home/money-matters/>

Amanda had provided a written update for BPHA. 'BPHA has now sent out its rent review letters to all of its customers, some of them may be your customers. This year we had to make quite a difficult decision in regard to the increase. Our rents will be increasing by 7.7% and 9.4% for shared owners. We are aware of the impact this may have on our customers.

The increases we face in insurances, repairs costs and mortgages have meant it is unavoidable. Service charges will continue to be apportioned in relation to the schemes/areas they are related to and are an exact sum of what BPHA is charged.

Our letters included links/QR Codes to our benefit calculator and our self-referral for support.

The money advice team is extremely busy currently and have had 140 referrals for support in the last two weeks. Our Rent Allowance Fund is still active to support those customers who have arrears and are struggling to maintain arrears payments. Criteria for support includes, those customers who are on income replacement benefits, customers who may have ongoing health/mental health issues, customers fleeing Domestic Abuse etc. Our charitable status stops us

helping customers who are shared owners. If you have a customer who would benefit from this support then please contact the moneyadviceteam@bpha.org.uk and mention RAF

Fran – Citizens Advice Bedford

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

Another service that is very busy. Any organisation that wants to make regular referrals is encouraged to make contact and obtain a partnership referral form, which greatly helps with the transition between services.

6. 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.

7. Update on BAF activities, including BAF training.

Len provided a written report which can be found at the end of these minutes.

An extensive training programme is being developed, with trainers and dates just being confirmed. If anybody would like to be considered as a trainer on BAF's training programmes, please let Len know. The publicity and booking forms will be distributed in the coming weeks.

8. Any other business

None

Date of next meetings

All 10.30am start:

- Wednesday 26th June 2024 - in person
- Tuesday 12th November 2024 - virtual
- Thursday 27th February 2025 - virtual

UPDATE REPORT

FOR BAF MEETING

29th February 2024

Update on BAF projects and activities

BAF training

BAF is currently planning its 2024 training programme. The draft programme is:

Course	Level	Date	Length	Trainer
Overview of Housing Rights	Introductory	May	2 hour (Online webinar)	Shelter
Overview of Universal Credit	Introductory	Spring	Half-day (Online course?)	Elliott Stephenson
Overview of Bereavement Benefits	Introductory	Spring	Half-day (Online course?)	Citizens Advice Bedford
Universal Credit – Managed Migration	Intermediate	Spring	Half-day (Online course?)	Elliott Stephenson
Advice Skills Programme (4 sessions)	Introductory	June/July	3 half-days plus 1 full-day	TBC
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

We are now trying to confirm all the trainers, and fix the dates, for the different courses. If anybody would like to be considered as a trainer on BAF's training programmes, please let us know.

We hope to start distributing the publicity, and booking forms, for the 2024 programme within the next few weeks.

Please contact Len Simkins (Training Consultant) for any information on the above.

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 13th March 2024** at Bunyan Meeting, Mill Street, Bedford.

Please contact Elliott Stephenson (BBN Facilitator) for further information about 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 will be organising BAF's 2024 training programme.

The current balance in the Company bank account is £788.22.

Please contact Len Simkins (AB's Company Secretary) for further information about the Company.
len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

BAF webpages

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

The BAF webpages (containing various information on BAF and its activities) are:

- About BAF
- Membership
- Forum Meetings
- Training Courses
- Benefits Network
- Projects
- Advice Bedfordshire
- Contact Us

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


Len Simkins – Project Consultant
29/2/24

POVERTY NETWORKING IN BEDFORDSHIRE

29th February 2024

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

POVERTY - DRIVERS



Banking and economic crisis (2008)

- ➔ 10 years of austerity policy (2010 – 2020)
- ➔ Massive cuts in public funding

Welfare Reform Act (2012)

- ➔ Major cuts and changes in benefits (2013 onwards)

Brexit (January 2020)

Covid Pandemic (March 2020 – December 2021)


War in Ukraine (2022 – Present)

Mini-Budget (September 2022)

- ➔ Effects have had serious impact on the economy
- ➔ Steep rise in inflation
- ➔ Surge in interest rates
- ➔ Cost of Living Crisis

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

POVERTY - DRIVERS




Ongoing impact of the economic problems

- ➔ Rising personal debt
- ➔ Cost of Living Crisis
- ➔ Increases in house repossessions and evictions
- ➔ Housing crisis
- ➔ Recession?
- ➔ Possible future rises in unemployment?

➔ **Increased poverty**

There have been some positive, short-term interventions

 **But where is the longer-term, strategic response?**

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Bedfordshire had a good history of anti-poverty work and initiatives in the past

- **Various strategic work led by the local Councils**
 - Bedfordshire County Council
 - Bedford Borough Council
 - Central Bedfordshire Council
- **Networking and campaigning led by the voluntary sector**
 - Bedfordshire Child Poverty Action Group
 - Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Bedfordshire County Council (until 2009)

- 4 anti-poverty conferences (1997, 2001, 2003 and 2005)
- Bedfordshire Tackling Poverty Together Group (2000 – 2010)
(Supported by Bedford Borough and Central Beds. Councils from 2009 – 2010)
- Quarterly newsletter - *Poverty News* (2002 – 2012)
(Funded by Bedford Borough Council from 2009 – 2012)
- Child poverty seminar (2007)
- Child poverty research – *Child poverty in Bedfordshire* (2009)
- Bedfordshire Child Poverty Network (2008 – 2009)

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ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Bedford Borough Council

- Poverty conference (1998)
- After LGR, support for Tackling Poverty Together Group (2009 – 2010) and the *Poverty News* newsletter (2009 – 2012)
- Adoption of child poverty indicator in Local Area Agreement (2009)
- Child Poverty Needs Assessment (2011)
- Poverty Task Force (2010 - 2012)

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ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Central Bedfordshire Council

- After LGR, support for Tackling Poverty Together Group (2009 – 2010)
- Adoption of child poverty indicator in Local Area Agreement (2009)
- Child Poverty Needs Assessment (2011)
- Child Poverty Strategy (2011)
- Child Poverty Task Group (2010 - 2014)

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ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Voluntary sector

- **Child Poverty Action Group** (1998 – 2012)

CPAG

Bedfordshire
Child Poverty Action Group
Campaigning against family and child poverty

CPAG members were individuals

- **Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group** (2017- 2020)

BedIPAG

WORKING TOGETHER TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY

BedIPAG members were local organisations

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ANTI-POVERTY WORK IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Despite poverty growing at worrying rates **all** of the established anti-poverty work led by the two local Councils and the voluntary sector has **stopped!**



At the very least, we need some form of campaigning local **anti-poverty network**

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Advice Forum

ROLE OF AN ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK

- **Forum** for VCS agencies in local area to discuss poverty issues
- **Raise awareness** of poverty issues
- **Campaign** on poverty issues
- **Share expertise** on poverty issues
- **Central resource** on poverty issues
- **Advise and support** organisations working with people in poverty

BUT it needs people with sufficient capacity and resources to lead the network

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Advice Forum