

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

Minutes of Forum Meeting - 10am - Thursday 18th November 2021

Present:

Wendy Jephcote	Autism Bedfordshire
Mike Hyden	JustUs
Caroline Cook	Mind BLMK
Trevor Moisey	Three Rivers Church, Bedford
Lydia Wright	BRCC
Chera Gilbert	Disability Resource Centre
Carol Madden	Money Advice at St Andrews
Chiara MacCall	Queens Park Community Organisation
Amanda Thaxter	Carers in Bedfordshire
Samantha Conder	Macmillan Welfare Rights
Maureen Sheridan	Sight Concern Bedfordshire
Paulette Rennie	Bedford Community Self-Help Group
Elliott Stephenson	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins	Autism Bedfordshire
Martin Trinder	CVS Beds (minutes)
Brian Cunningham	BRASS
Emma Branch	The Counselling Foundation

Apologies:

Amanda Ryan	BPHA
Susanna Fagg	Royal British Legion
Yasmina Mahmood	Hospital Social Work Team - Bedford Borough Council

Elliott chaired the meeting as Vice-Chair, and started the meeting by welcoming everybody.

3. Minutes of last Forum meeting (24th June 2021) and matters arising

The minutes of the last Forum meeting were agreed. There were no matters arising that were not on the agenda.

4. Presentation – Mike Hyden, JustUs

Mike provided an overview of the work of JustUs, highlighted some key points relating to the rights of people in accessing housing support from the local authorities, and dispelled some of the common myths.

Mike recommended the following Local Government Ombudsman report as some background reading - <https://www.lgo.org.uk/assets/attach/1727/FR-Homelessness-July-2011-amended-Dec-202015.pdf>

The JustUs website (<https://www.justus.org.uk>) provides further information, including details of the training courses on offer.

Attendees commented that a large number of the enquiries now also have a housing element to the case, so the support, training and information from JustUs will be extremely useful.

Elliott thanked Mike for coming to the meeting.

5. Information Exchange/ 6. Mutual Assistance

Wendy (Austim Beds) highlighted her role as a Benefit Adviser, and that details of all the services can be found on the website - <https://www.autismbedfordshire.net>. Wendy can be contacted on wendy.jephcote@autismbeds.org.uk

Elliott (GUHG) explained the role of the Financial Wellbeing team in helping customers with welfare benefits and debt advice. More details at <https://www.guhg.co.uk/help-advice/benefit-and-money-advice-services/>

Caroline (Mind BLMK) highlighted the continuing transition back to some face-to-face work. Caroline also highlighted the Crisis café's located across the area, for which no appointment is required - <https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/how-we-can-help/crisis-support/>

Carol (Money Advice at St Andrews) - A new website to promote the service has been launched - <https://www.moneyadvicestandrews.org/>

Amanda (Carers in Beds): Bereavement workshops are for former carers who have been bereaved in the last 2 years. Aimed at those aged 60+ but can include younger former carers. Each workshop runs for 5 weeks and covers a variety of topics and concludes with a more informal social session on week 5. The next set of workshops will commence in Ampthill from the middle of January and we have a 3rd set scheduled in February in the Leighton Buzzard area. Contact Amanda.Thaxter@carersinbeds.org.uk, or 07794 005996

Paulette (Bedford Community Self-Help Group) -The group are hopeful that they can return to face-to-face activities in the new year.

Brian (BRASS) – The service is gradually moving back to face-to-face activities, but the popular Christmas Party will not be possible this year.

Len highlighted that 2022 will be the 25th Anniversary of Bedfordshire Advice Forum.

Emma (Counselling Foundation) gave a brief overview of the work of the Counselling Foundation, and highlighted that clients are often now presenting with multiple issues. Emma's email is emma.branch@counsellingfoundation.org, and there will be a refreshed website at <https://counsellingfoundation.org/>

Lydia – BRCC -The Village Agents have resumed some face-to-face work. They are also reporting a notable increase of cases with complex needs.

Chera (DRC) reported that all the services are busy and open. More details at <https://drcbeds.org.uk/>

7. Proposed new partnership arrangements for the advice sector in Central Bedfordshire

Len gave a presentation on the proposed future arrangements (see attached presentation).

It was highlighted that there would be no funding for BAF under the current proposal.

If anybody has any further comments, please email Len in the next couple of weeks - len.simkins@infotrain.co.uk

8. Update on BAF's other services and activities, including training.

Len provided an update – see the attached report.

9. Any other business

Members discussed the issues and challenges of holding meetings (including the next BAF meeting) physically. No decision has yet been made.

Date of next meeting - Thursday 24th February 2022

NEW ADVICE SECTOR PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS IN CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE

Proposal

BAF meeting
18th November 2021

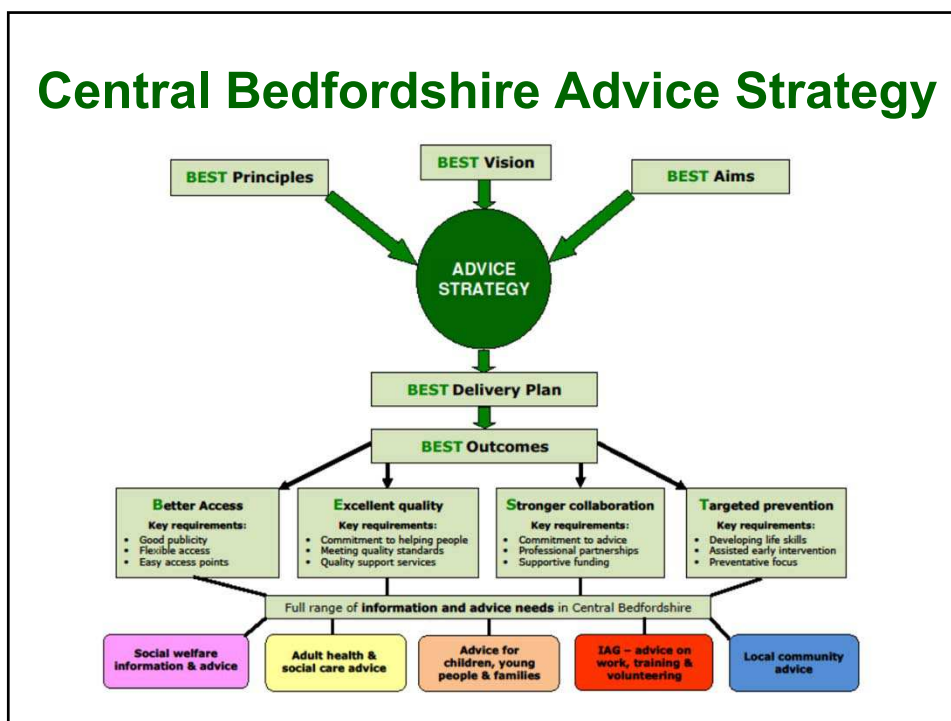


Advice sector partnership working in Central Bedfordshire

- 2011** Launch of **original Advice Strategy** (2011-2014)
– covering social welfare advice
(Strategy extended to 2016)
- 2016** Launch of **revised Advice Strategy** (2016-2019)
– innovative strategy covering the full range of
community information and advice needs
(Strategy extended to 2020 – then put on hold during Covid pandemic in 2020/21)
- 2021** Proposal to introduce new partnership arrangements
to replace using the Advice Strategy



Central Bedfordshire Advice Strategy



Advice Strategy - Successes

- Enabled a **good working relationship** between CBC and advice agencies for 10 years – with a collaborative, multi-agency approach – over 29 partnership meetings held (initially through the Advice Planning Board and then later the Advice Strategy Management Group)
- Helped put **advice work firmly on the CB agenda**
- Helped support the launch, and continued funding, of **AdviceCentral**
- Helped provide **funding for BAF** and its support activities
- Other achievements through the **Advice Strategy Delivery Plans**
 - Organised a number of **consultancy workshops to discuss advice needs** and the development of the Advice Strategies
 - **Linked Advice Strategy with other key CB strategies and focussed work** eg Anti-Poverty Strategy; Volunteering Strategy (and Volunteering Campaign); Welfare Reform; Care Act responsibilities; Mosaic data intelligence system
 - Arranged two surveys to **map advice provision** in Central Beds
 - Enabled transfer of **directory of advice agencies** from BAF's old Advice Directory to the AdviceCentral website
 - Printed and distributed **flyer** for frontline staff to promote "Everybody's got a role in advice"



Advice Strategy - Challenges

- The wider Advice Strategy (covering all community information and advice) was perhaps too ambitious – it became **difficult to obtain regular engagement with wider stakeholders** in advice work - the regular attenders at ASMG meetings have always mainly been local advice agencies
- The **Advice Strategy / Delivery Plan structure is fairly rigid and formal**, and had become rather stale – during the Covid pandemic, when the Strategy was put on hold, good partnership working and initiatives evolved naturally
- Due to lack of funded time and resources it became **difficult to put some good ideas into practice** eg development of an effective Advice Strategy Toolkit; development of an Advice Proofing Tool; development of a quality system for local advice agencies



New partnership proposal

NAME

Central Bedfordshire Social Welfare Advice Partnership (SWAP)

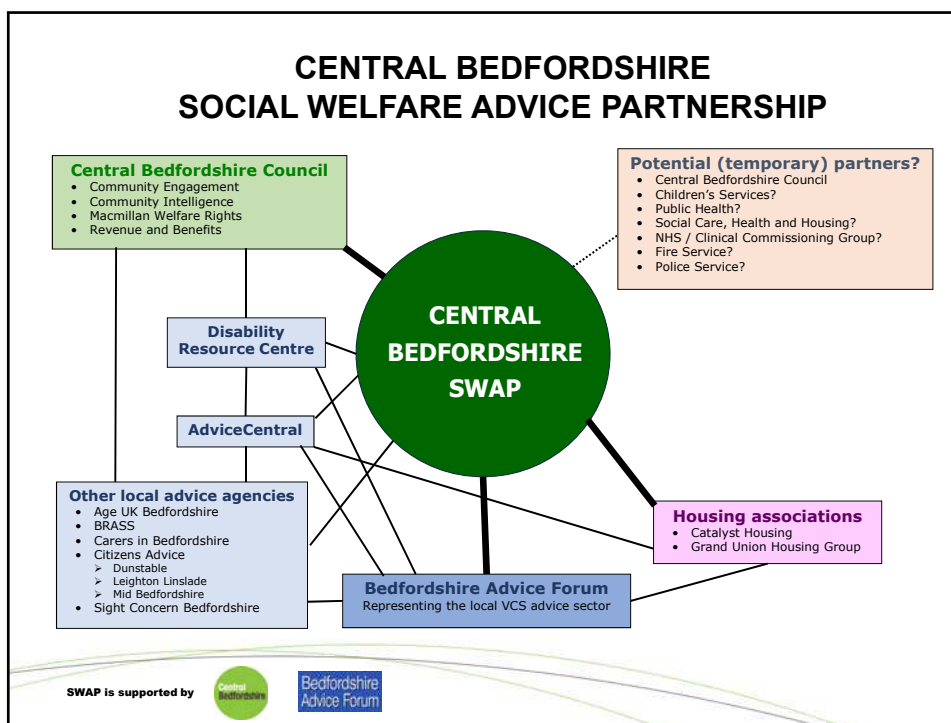
SCOPE

Social welfare advice (covering benefits, debt, housing rights, employment rights, consumer rights, and other social welfare rights)

PARTNERS

CBC and local social welfare advice providers (ie BAF members)
(**NB** Other partners may join on a temporary basis to work on specific issues/projects)





New partnership proposal

AIMS

1. To **bring together interested partners** to:
 - have an overview of advice needs and provision in Central Bedfordshire
 - discuss, and have an input into, topical issues and projects relating to advice services
 - act as a consultative forum on advice related issues and plans
 - be a "Champion for Advice" and a voice for local advice services
2. To **influence and encourage the provision of resources** to ensure that there is a robust, proactive and high quality local advice sector in Central Bedfordshire
3. To **help the advice sector and CBC innovate** and respond to new advice related trends and demands

New partnership proposal

PRACTICALITIES

- A basic **partnership agreement** should be developed
- **Regular partnership meetings** could be held 3 times year. Extra sub-group meetings may be needed at certain times to support different project work
- The partnership meetings will be **facilitated** by CBC
- The arrangements would be **flexible**, dealing with issues and projects as they arise, rather than being tied to a more rigid Delivery Plan



UPDATE REPORT FOR BAF MEETING

Update on BAF projects and activities

BAF training

Overview of Universal Credit - online session (Spring/Summer 2021)

A grant of £1,000 was awarded by The Harpur Trust for BAF to prepare and deliver an overview (2 hour) session on UC aimed at community staff and volunteers.

An initial pilot online session was held with the HEART Academies Trust in Bedford on 27th May. 6 welfare support staff attended

A second online session was held on Zoom for wider community staff in Bedford Borough on 15th July. 16 people attended from 12 local organisations. Feedback from participants was very positive.

The tutors (Elliott and Len) can offer support to anybody from BAF agencies who wants to train up to be able to present this "Overview of UC" session in the future – either in-house at their own agencies or externally on behalf of BAF.

Future BAF training

BAF hopes to be able to provide some more training in 2022. A blended approach to training (using face-to-face and online delivery) could be used in future. New tutors would be very welcome.

Bedfordshire Benefits Network

These network meetings, for benefit advisers, are very well attended (average attendance is about 20 per meeting).

A meeting was held on 30th September and discussed: benefit update since last meeting; other benefit issues and updates; updates from the local benefit offices; future arrangements for BBN meetings; information exchange; and BAF training.

The next BBN meeting will be at 10.00am on 16th March 2022.

Advice Strategy – Central Bedfordshire

This work has been supported by CBC for 10 years. However, this year CBC raised doubts about whether continuing to use the Advice Strategy / Delivery Plan structure is still the best way forward. This has been discussed at the last two Advice Strategy Management Group meetings and a proposal has now been made for some new partnership arrangements. This proposal will be presented and discussed at today's BAF meeting.

CBC has recently paid its grant of £1,000 as a contribution towards BAF's core costs in 2021/22 to enable BAF to support the advice sector in Central Bedfordshire. A payment was also made for the Advice Strategy facilitation work in the period April – September 2021. CBC will be responsible for organising the new partnership arrangements, from October onwards.

Advice Bedfordshire

The current bank balance for the Company is **£4,530.11**. This includes the recent payments from CBC for the Advice Strategy work (£2,500), and from The Harpur Trust for the Universal Credit training programmes earlier in the year (£2,000). The fees and expenses owed for this work will now be paid by the Company.

Voluntaryworks Consortium

BAF is a partner in the Voluntaryworks (VW) Consortium, and I represent BAF at Consortium meetings. No Consortium meetings have been held recently.

The Consortium's trading company (Voluntaryworks Ltd) was officially dissolved with Companies House in August.

Bedford Independent Poverty Action Group

I attend the BedIPAG meetings on behalf of BAF. There have been no meetings yet in 2021.

Len Simkins – Project Consultant
18/11/21