

# BEDFORDSHIRE ADVICE FORUM

Promoting and supporting the provision of advice and information services in Bedfordshire

## Minutes of Meeting held on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2009 Salvation Army Hall, Commercial Road, Bedford

### Present:

Wendy Anderson-Welsh	Bedford Race Equality Council (Chair)
Alexandra Austin	Bedfordshire County Council - Trading Standards
Rob Bailey	Sight Concern
Prith Chander	Anchor Staying Put
Michele Collins	Aragon Housing Association
Balbir Dutt	Luton Law Centre
Heather Gilbert	Bedford Borough Council – Housing Options
Lorraine Gunther	Bedford CAB
Rose Hounjbedji	Thai 3 Counties
Bryden Keenan	BRASS
Tanya Richardson	Create/Finance ReDirect
Len Simkins	Advice UK (Eastern Region)
Lauren Stanley	Bedfordshire County Council - Trading Standards
Becky Steffens	Dunstable CAB
David Waggott	Mid Bedfordshire CAB
Ann Whitmore	The Salvation Army Debt Advice Service
David Wood	Leighton Linlade CAB
Susannah Rastall	Infotrains (Minutes)
Lindsay Mitton	Bedfordshire County Council - Visitor - for last 3 items.

### 1. Apologies

Trevor Moisey	Rutland Road Church
Irene Tindall	Age Concern
Peter Doyle	Bedford Credit Union
Liz Morgan	Disability Resource Centre

### Action

### 2. Minutes and Matters Arising

- 2.1 The **minutes** of the previous Forum meeting (7<sup>th</sup> October 2008) were accepted as an accurate record.
- 2.2 **Matters Arising** - there were no matters arising

### 3. BAF membership Scheme

An update report was distributed giving details of the BAF Membership Scheme. BAF now has 42 confirmed members and from now on only these agencies will be receiving information regarding future BAF meetings and events.

Membership runs from April to April and a decision will be made at the next BAF AGM regarding 2009/10 membership fees.

## 4. BAF Training

- 4.1 **Autumn 2008 training programme** - total expected income from the programme is £2,080 and total expenditure was £838.80. This will leave Advice Bedfordshire with an expected surplus of £1,241.20.

A **separate evaluation report** on the training programme was distributed at the meeting.

- 4.2 **Future plans for training relating to economic downturn** – £2,409 has been awarded to BAF by the Bedfordshire County Council (Economic Growth) to run three half-day courses for advisers.

The courses will be aimed at inexperienced advisers (paid staff and volunteers) and will be free of charge to BAF members. Len asked if there were any trainers amongst the forum who could train these courses:

- **Losing a job** – David Waggott said he would confirm on Friday if there was a trainer available at Mid Beds CAB.
- **Claiming benefits** – deadline set for Friday – if a trainer cannot be confirmed by then, Len will consider acting as trainer for this course.
- **Dealing with debt** – David Wood confirmed that a trainer may be available at Leighton Linlade CAB.

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The courses will be arranged in March/April. Publicity will be circulated shortly.

- 4.3 **Other training** – Wendy asked if there was any particular training the Forum was interested in for the future.

- **Employment and Support Allowance** – it was generally agreed that another course on the ESA would be useful – possibly paying for an external trainer. A comprehensive outline of the ESA can also be found on the DWP website: [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)
- **Overview of equality law** – Luton Law Centre can offer training in the Bedford area. A course will be arranged later this year.
- **Equality Impact Assessments** – BREC could offer a full-day course to agencies should there be an interest.

## 5. Update on other BAF Activities

- 5.1 **Advice Bedfordshire** - Since April 2008, Advice Bedfordshire has made a surplus of £1,318.83

- 5.2 **Voluntary Works** – BAF has been given funds by Voluntary Works to have an input into the Local Government Re-organisation in Bedfordshire. (See point 7 in the minutes). It is also hoped that further funding for BAF will be available from Voluntary Works in 2009/10 – possibly to help finance the BAF meetings.

- 5.3 **BAF Website** ([www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk))

Len had updated the website. On the website members can find:

- The latest news on BAF
- A list of current BAF members - giving a link to members' websites

- Copies of agendas and minutes of BAF meetings
- Publicity on BAF's training programmes - and booking details
- An update on BAF's projects
- BAF contact details

The website will be updated regularly. Len requested each member check their details and forward the website link they would like included on the site.

**All**

#### 5.4 Themes for future BAF meetings

- The next BAF meeting will incorporate the **AGMs** for BAF and for Advice Bedfordshire.
- **Quality Marks** – there are new developments on quality marks for the advice sector which need to be discussed e.g. the interim arrangements that are being introduced for the LSC Quality Mark; and the development of a new Quality Mark for the sector.
- **Effects of the Local Government Re-organisation on the local advice sector** - and the results of BAF's LGR project (see 7 below)

## 6. Bedfordshire Children's Centres Project

Len gave a background to the new project – full details are in the BAF Update Report attached.

Funding of £14,700 has been awarded to BAF (through Advice Bedfordshire) for a project to help develop the links between Children's Centres in Bedfordshire and the local advice sector. The funding covers the following:

- (1) **Updating and revising the Bedfordshire Advice Directory** - and producing a 2009 version of the Directory in an online format.

A questionnaire will be sent to all relevant agencies that need to be included in the Directory, requesting details of the information they feel should be listed.

**Infotrain**

Although the Directory must meet the Children's Centre requirements, it will be 'owned' by BAF.

- (2) **Conducting research** into the potential future links between local advice agencies and the Children's Centres in Bedfordshire

The Children's Centres are interested in outreach advice sessions and this research into the possible benefits of these sessions would help future funding.

Bedford CAB and BBC Housing Options confirmed they had already been asked to do ad-hoc outreach advice sessions with children's centres – Len confirmed he would like to discuss their views for the research.

**Infotrain**

- (3) **Maintaining and updating the Advice Directory** in 2009/10

BAF's Steering Group will be appointing a Project Group to oversee the project. If any BAF members would like to join the Project Group they would be welcome. A work plan has been established for this project – a summary is also in the attached Update Report.

An outline/draft of the Directory will be presented at the June BAF meeting.

## 7. Local Government Re-organisation

BAF has been awarded £3,000 to help the advice sector in relation to the Local Government Re-organisation in Bedfordshire. BAF's Steering Group will be overseeing the project and Infotrain has been asked to manage the project.

Full details are in the attached Update Report. The aims of the project are to raise the profile of the advice sector and to encourage the new Councils to develop an Advice Strategy. A **draft discussion paper** was distributed at the meeting and will also be available on the BAF website. A **draft of a letter** that could be sent to the two new Councils was also distributed.

It was agreed that key officers should be listed in the letter as these are the people that need to be involved in any discussion with the advice sector. By arranging meetings with the new Councils it is hoped to bring BAF to their attention and to emphasise the benefits and needs of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector.

The meetings with the Councils to take discussions forward need to be arranged as soon as possible as the funding obtained for this project is for this financial year. However, it was recognised that further discussions/meetings would be needed in the future and that these may be affected by the results of the Council elections in June.

Members at the meeting were asked for feedback on the effect of the Local Government Re-organisation. The following comments were made:

- Agencies In Bedford confirmed that no letter had been received confirming funding for 2009/10, although it was recognised that essentially funding will remain the same as 2008/09 in the short term.
- For countywide agencies there has been no clear indication of the split in funding from each Council. This is creating cash-flow issues.

## 8. Information Exchange

**8.1 Aragon Housing** – a Money Advice Service was started in August 2008 for tenants and shared ownership. This is very busy.

Michelle will send contact details of the following groups as they may be interested in membership of BAF:

- **Bromford Group** provides housing related support to vulnerable people
- **One Support** (provides housing care and support)

MC

**8.2 Housing Options (Bedford Borough Council)** – Heather gave details of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme that is now available. This is a very last option for people and involves various eligibility criteria; however the procedure is in place.

**8.3 Mid Beds CAB** – following extra funding from the County Council, opening hours have been increased to 30 hours/week and a new post is being advertised for a debt adviser.

**8.4 Salvation Army** – as a new member of BAF, Ann explained that the Salvation Army took a holistic approach to debt advice and were aware of the importance of signposting for other issues. They currently have 12 debt advisers and funding for a further 8 advisers. The service was open 5 days/week with a 24/7 answerphone.

- 8.5 Dunstable CAB** – with extra funding from the County Council, the bureau will be open for 5 days/week instead of 4 for one year. This will help with the large increase in demand for advice.
- 8.6 Leighton Linlade CAB** – following extra funding from the County Council the bureau will open extra hours.
- 8.7 Bedford CAB** – Lorraine, the new CAB Manager, confirmed that Bedford CAB is now on the path to development following various problems in 2008. There is increased capacity to deal with debt and they hope to increase capacity to deal with welfare issues and employment.
- A new triaging system in place to improve waiting times for clients.
- They are currently recruiting local trustees. The CAB is aware of previous problems but is now on track to resolving these issues.
- 8.8 Sight Concern** – Rob confirmed that they can accept referrals for anyone with a sight impairment who requires advice.
- 8.9 BREC** – Wendy confirmed that BREC offers a drop-in advice surgery and will be recruiting an additional adviser 2 days/week. BREC is also keen to re-engage with Bedford CAB.
- 8.10 Trading Standards** – Alexandra confirmed that Trading Standards would be split into two different teams in April - one in Central Beds Council and the other in Bedford Borough Council.
- 8.11 Economic Growth** - Lindsay confirmed that she will be moving from Bedfordshire County Council to Bedford Borough Council in April and will be the main contact within the Economic Growth department. She is keen to be kept up-to-date with BAF activities and has been added to the circulation list.

## 9. Any other business

- 9.1 BRIEF** – as the County Council's Welfare Rights Service is being disbanded it is unclear how BRIEF (Bedfordshire Rights Information Exchange Forum) will continue. It had been suggested that BRIEF could be incorporated into the BAF meetings in future. To discuss at the AGM
- 9.2 Equality and Diversity Awards** – this event, organised by BREC, will take place on 24<sup>th</sup> October at the Swan Hotel, Bedford.

## 10. Date of next Forum meeting and AGM

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> June at 2.00 pm.

BAF meetings are organised by



and are facilitated by

**infotrain**  
Services Ltd

All documents discussed in these minutes are available from Infotrain:

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