

**Minutes of the meeting of
Central Beds Access Group
Held on Tuesday 8th February 2011
At Priory House, Chicksands, Shefford**

Present

Roy Storey	CBAG
Ian Kelly	CBAG
Mary Walsh	CBAG
Jean Bird	Guide Dogs for the Blind/CBAG
Martin Usher	Access Officer CBC/CBAG
Simon Daize	Beds Police/CBAG
Sandra Ridgeway	Bedfordshire LINK
Max Coleman	Bedfordshire LINK
Clare Harding	Corporate Policy Advisor (Equality and Diversity) CBC
Steve Nash	Aragon Housing/CBAG
Simon Knock	Greensand Trust
Mike Osborne	Autism Beds
Jan Esson	2011 Census
Samantha Holder	CBC Building Control
Tim Hoyle	CBC Head of Building Systems Social Care
Susan Childerhouse	CBC Public Protection/Licensing

1. Welcome & Introductions

The Chairman welcomed all to the meeting and introduced the guests.

2. Apologies Received

Seema Jassi	Aragon Housing
Sally Aspinall	CPPC/CBAG
Charlotte Bonser	Bedfordshire LINK/CBAG
Lorna Walker	CBAG
Peter Keates	CBC Building Control
Clare Harding	Corporate Policy Advisor (Equality and Diversity) CBC

3. To agree the Minutes of the meeting held on 9th November 2010

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9th November 2010 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

4. To receive a report from Tim Hoyle, Head of Business Systems Social Care, Health and Housing, regarding the structure of the Welfare Rights Service

Tim Hoyle explained how he was responsible for a number of services within Social Care, Health and Housing and Welfare Rights Services. He had been given the remit to review the Welfare Rights Service, with a view to its closure. He had looked for other options but unfortunately found there was no alternative. There had followed a staff consultation process which had now concluded. His aim now was go through the consultation process with users as to how they would be affected by the closure.

Tim Hoyle explained that this was not a public welfare rights service but was based on case work and referrals from other agencies. Any members of the public not already receiving services from CBC, such as social care, were already being referred to the Citizens Advice Bureau for advice. It was the intention that CAB would take over this role for all those seeking advice on welfare rights.

At this time only one member of staff remained in this department and Tim Hoyle was mainly looking at who/what else could provide this service. However, MacMillan Welfare Rights Service would continue and had three further years funding for work with cancer sufferers. People on benefits who were being financially assessed would also continue to get advice and support.

The consultation process with voluntary organizations had been carried out pre Christmas, and Tim had also met with Managers of Children's services and the CAB. Now the remaining member of staff was working on the provision of leaflets to explain the current situation regarding benefits and who could be approached for advice in the future. They were also looking to assess who would be the most vulnerable and in circumstances where CAB would be unlikely to be able to assist.

In response to a question Tim advised that the money saved by CBC by axing this service would be £80,000, but no additional funding was going to be given to CAB to help them provide these services to the public in future.

The Group hoped that Tim Hoyle would take the following points and concerns into account when reporting his findings following the consultation process. Overall, it was hoped that something could be salvaged from an already dismantled service.

1. It was considered that a lot of the work CAB currently carried out was not highly specialised so CAB staff would not have long term welfare rights experience to draw upon. There was also a potential that the closure of the current service would adversely affect individual lives. The Group felt that there was a need to maintain a facility for CBC and individuals to access such advice.

2. Tim Hoyle believed that the future service would need to continue as a referral system as Social Services would normally pass such cases on to the Welfare Rights Department. No information was given to the Group as to how that would/could work.

3. At the current time between 600 and 700 people were referred annually to the Welfare Rights Service through Social Services. The Group had several concerns regarding this. What would happen in the interim period of changeover, what would happen if the slack was not/could not be taken up by CAB, what would happen if current CBC funding was not increased or was decreased and what would happen if CAB did not prioritise social service referrals. It was felt that based on past history and budget cuts, it was unlikely that CAB would be getting funding in this way.

4. The Group felt that no recognition was being given to the fact that nobody had the money, or was trained to pick this up from CBC and there were no plans for any funding to support it. Therefore, it was difficult to understand how CAB was expected to absorb the 600 – 700 - additional customers from CBC, who would not have a budget to assist.

5. An assumption was being made that people could access advice from Direct Gov, as Tim Hoyle felt that most advice provided to people was fairly straightforward. The Group felt that no account had been taken of the 5% of the population with no access to computers, who may have learning difficulties and other disabilities that would make this option totally unacceptable. There were a number of vulnerable people who did need the service to continue in its current form.

6. The Group felt that, as the staff had already been cut to one and the budget had also already been withdrawn, the current procedure could not be viewed as a consultation process. Although Tim Hoyle felt that if a viable working plan was produced as a result of consultation it may be considered, he stated that the bottom line was that there was no budget and the money would then need to come from somewhere else.

7. The Group maintained that there were a number of advocacy services across Bedfordshire fighting for funding from all available sources and there was no clear plan as to how the shortfall was going to be covered. These services are for the most vulnerable in society and those were the very people who could least afford to lose it. It was felt that CBC could not absolve itself from its own responsibilities, by passing them on to other services that it would not be funding in full. Tim Hoyle pointed out that this was not a legal requirement, although he recognised that the moral responsibility was not being taken into account either, the actual decision was not within his remit. His job was to ensure there was somewhere else for people to go.

8. The Group were informed that only a limited audit of available services had been made in the area before the decision had been taken to cut this service and pass it to CAB. Tim Hoyle was advised that Aragon Housing provided an advice service under the heading of Money Matters and they were already aware that the issues surrounding security of tenure would have a massive impact on people on benefits.

9. The Group were concerned about the services that would be provided to accompany people such as those with severe learning difficulties or deaf/blind when attempting to consult CAB, but was told this was already provided for under their care/support package.

10. The Group contributed a number of case histories (including their own experiences) concerned with problems experienced by those who were currently disabled, blind, profoundly deaf, Autistic and suffering from such conditions as Asperger's. These people, although diagnosed, would often find themselves considered to fall outside of the criteria for help in accessing benefits they are entitled to, as not recognised as needing such help. Those being given their own budgets would not necessarily be able to protect themselves from being taken advantage of by carers. There were many scenarios, and it was felt that CBC, who was among a minority of providers who were taking this course of action within the cuts process, had made no impact assessment on the overall impact of all the cuts on such vulnerable groups. A holistic approach was required.

11. The Group asked that Tim Hoyle look to retain the one remaining member of staff as a fount of knowledge to be drawn on, and look very closely at the CBC proposal which they felt was entirely wrong. Tim Hoyle's final comment was that he would look at any possible case to retain as much as possible, but felt that the likely response would be that there was not a budget available. He felt that they would be able to fund providing someone to accompany a claimant to the CAB office to act as interpreter for instance, but would not be providing the

actual service themselves. The Group emphasised their inability to agree with or support anything that was being done but thanked Tim Hoyle for his frankness in addressing the issues.

During the debate it was also pointed out by Members of Bedfordshire LINK that they had been targeted to become Health Watch in 2012 and so charged with adding this aspect of welfare benefits to their remit. However, the members felt that they lacked preparation, training and funding.

5. To receive an update from Charlotte Bonser of the Bedfordshire LINK

As Charlotte had been unable to attend the meeting herself, Max Coleman read out the written report on her behalf.

Concerns had been raised concerning funding for the LINK by CBC, and this was expected to be cut by a quarter despite plans for it to become the new Health Watch with a remit to oversee doctors, hospitals and all local services. LINK had received a letter from the Department of Health that stated that local authorities had been given the same level of funding plus an increase to cover inflation, in order to facilitate the transfer from LINK to Health Watch. Unfortunately this money had not been ring fenced and, although the transfer should be in place by 2012, the actual funding was still not agreed. LINK was also concerned that it was intended to have 3 Health Watch organisations working in Bedfordshire and included separate ones for Luton and Bedford. The current LINK did not agree with this approach.

The work of LINK continued and included a survey of all care homes in Bedfordshire and Luton, the raising of concerns regarding inappropriate discharges from hospitals, and a survey of bed provision in Luton and Bedfordshire – no response had actually been received from either Luton or Bedford for this particular survey.

6 2011 Census report from Jan Esson

Jan Esson advised the Group that the Census was to take place in March and would be delivered mainly through postal questionnaires or hand delivered and collected forms for those within shared facilities. It was also possible to fill in a Census form on line. Visits would be made to those not completing the questionnaire to remind them to do this and offer assistance. It was a legal requirement and there would be a policing team and a team dealing with people who refused to complete their forms. Advice leaflets and publications were circulated to the Group. All organisations providing services had been contacted and asked to advertise this to their members and contacts.

Advice would be available on line and the Census would be heavily advertised with a free telephone number for advice to be obtained. It would be possible to ask for someone to visit and help to complete the questionnaire which would be available in hard print and many other alternative formats. The guidance leaflets included Braille translations and advice was available in DVD format and 56 different languages. Mental Health issues, language problems etc would all be catered for and help would be available.

Jan wanted to emphasise the importance of collecting hard data in this way as it could be used as a real source of backing to get services for groups who need them.

Jan felt that, although this may be the last census taken following a decision in Parliament, the last one was now 10 years old and very much out of date and so no one was aware of the needs of the population, therefore it was even more important to acquire this data now. They would also be collecting data by visiting shelters in order to capture information from the homeless and really vulnerable. Concerns were expressed by several members of the Group that the hidden vulnerable people, such as the homeless, travellers and vagrants, could be largely overlooked and some could be suffering from conditions which were not properly diagnosed, and so their specific needs would also be overlooked. Jan advised that the Manager in a nursing home, for instance, could fill in a form for a person that did not have the mental capability to do it for themselves. It was noted that impact assessments required supporting information for any assumptions made and the census could be a source of information.

7. Reports from members regarding access issues in their areas.

The issue of road and pavement gritting in relation to safety issues was raised and it was felt that all areas were experiencing problems relating to this and each local Council was having to find ways to address this themselves – such as purchasing their own salt bins.

Susan Childerhouse advised that there had been consultation regarding changes to the Licensing Act and the definition of ‘interested parties’. However, the objectives had not been changed. The NHS would be included as a responsible authority, so they could make objections to an application, and all application would be put out into the community (on line) and people would be able to comment. The Licensing Authority would become a liable authority and they were now waiting for guidance as to what constituted an acceptable objection – the terms under which an objection could be made had not yet been set.

There had also been consultation regarding taxis and disability awareness training for taxi drivers.

Simon Knock advised that there had been no major changes since his last attendance and passed on a request that the Access Group be involved in Rushmere.

The Chairman advised that the Access Group had been involved in a matter relating to an accident to an elderly lady at a building in Flitwick and this person might have to take this matter to Court for resolution.

The Chairman enquired as to the future position of the Access Officer at CBC, as Martin Usher had been doing excellent work in his role as Access Officer. Many planning applications required to be assessed with regards to the DDA and this Officer advised Planning Officers on those aspects of a planning application. Martin responded that within other authorities, the Access Group would take on that role and look at planning applications. This was supported by Samantha Holder of CBC. Ian Kelly was qualified to do this and, to date, everything that CBAG had been involved with, the Access Officer had assisted with plans and all plans put forward had been carried out based on the advice given to them by the Group.

Ian Kelly commented that he was not happy with the Housing Associations interpretation of Accessible Housing.

8. **Correspondence received since the Agenda was set and needs an urgent response**

There was no such correspondence received.

Date and venue of the Groups AGM - to be held on 15th March 2011 at Chicksands.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and for their contribution to the Group.