

BCAN Homeless Forum Information Sheet An Introduction

Background

BCAN has been operating in Bristol for some years, and undertakes a range of activities. One of these activities has been the establishment of a Homeless Forum.

The BCAN Homeless Forum ('BHF') started as an experiment: people were invited to a single meeting, and decided that it would be helpful to continue to learn from each other and explore ways in which we can work with each other more effectively.

Since the initial meeting in September 2001, the BHF has met every two months.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the BCAN Homeless Forum is to support the activities of our member groups in working with homeless and ex-homeless people in and around Bristol.

Activities

We support our member groups primarily in three ways: through meetings, training and publications,

The *meetings* provide an opportunity to share information and concerns, ask questions, explore issues, and develop joint policies and guidelines. They are also an opportunity for related organisations (like the Council or other charities) to be invited to attend and describe their activities and priorities to us.

The *training* is aimed at the staff and volunteers of our member groups, but is open to anyone who would benefit from it. At present, we cover a series of ten topics over the course of a year. Networking is a key aspect of both the BHF meetings and the training sessions.

The *publications* reflect input to the meetings, and also internal documents groups have offered to share to help others. At present, these publications are offered free of charge, both as paper and in several electronic formats.

We also have a role in representing our part of the voluntary sector to the Council and statutory bodies, speaking on behalf of the groups we represent and the clients we serve.

Membership

There is a certain ambiguity in the set-up at present. Individuals attend the meetings, and are asked to act as representatives of the groups they come from. The

membership, as it currently operates, applies to the individuals, but they are present because of the groups and organisations they belong to.

At present, there is no formal membership, and we do not ask the organisation if it wants to be a member of the BHF: sending someone to attend the meetings is sufficient.

We do not seek to impose common standards or guidelines on the member groups: membership is not dependent on agreeing with a given party line. However, where there is a general consensus on an issue, we communicate it even if not all the members are in agreement.

In practice, the membership falls into two groups: the active members who attend the meetings, and the non-participating members who receive the meeting notes and other literature that is made available.

Ethos

The BHF functions in several ways.

In the meetings, we are a 'Community of Practice' serving the active members – please see the document describing this in more detail. We believe it is important that all the groups working with homeless people discover how to work together more effectively.

We also provide services to the whole membership – in practice, to anyone who contacts us and asks for help with something related to our area of work. This often takes the form of distributing information to the wider, non-participating membership, but sometimes it involves other forms of advice and assistance.

We would like to see our influence used to publicise the needs of homeless people in Bristol, and to see better resources made available to help them.

Faith

BCAN is a Christian organisation, sponsored by the Bristol and District Evangelical Alliance.

The BCAN Homeless Forum was initially established as a resource for the Christian groups in Bristol working with homeless people. However, all groups working with homeless and ex-homeless people in Bristol are welcome: the only requirement is that members respect the beliefs of the faith groups involved.

Future Development

We need to ask the current 'member' organisations if they want to be members of the BHF. There needs to be a sign-up process, and probably a clearer set of principles and objectives.

We are functioning with, and therefore probably need a two-level membership structure. Would it be appropriate to call these 'Members' and 'Friends'? Is there a more helpful terminology?

If we develop a more formal membership, what would be an appropriate level of membership fee?