

BCAN
Homeless Forum
City Road Baptist Church
19 September 2002

Introduction

Steve Abbott chaired the meeting. Pippa Chappell opened the meeting with prayer, and then Steve welcomed everyone.

Those Present

Steve Abbott (BCAN), Pippa Chappell (elim@bristol), Paul Hazelden (Crisis Centre Ministries), John Knuckey (Carmel Christian Centre), Val Moore (Christchurch, Clifton), Denise Neale-Gordon (elim@bristol), Linda Piggott (Crisis Centre Ministries), Richard Reddrop (Emmaus Bristol), Dorothy Richie (Christchurch Breakfast Run), Martin Southgate (Caring at Christmas) and Paul Tipler (Aspire).

Apologies Received

Apologies had been received from Anni Davey (Crisis Centre Ministries), Medina Johnson (Caring at Christmas), Clive Richards (Trinity Tabernacle) and Graham Wheeler (Bristol Soup Run Trust).

Previous Meeting

There were no corrections to the notes of the previous meeting.

Matters Arising

Survival Guide: 2,000 copies of the Survival Guide have been distributed, and another 3,000 are currently being printed. Please contact Caring at Christmas if you need more copies. The consistent feedback from a number of sources says that it is very helpful.

Insurance Cover: despite various attempts by Paul, no further details of insurance cover for volunteers are available at present. Richard Reddrop will try and get some information: if he succeeds, Paul will distribute it with the notes from the meeting. It was noted that people from Christchurch, Clifton (and probably a number of other churches) are covered under the church's insurance policy when they go out. It would be wise for people from other churches to check whether this is the case for them.

Information Share

Christchurch are starting their breakfast run again each week, commencing on Saturday 12 October 2002. They will visit the Watershed, Pip'n'Jay and the Bus Shelter.

Shelter has circulated some organisations with details of their revised opening hours...

Multi-organisational newsletter

Martin Southgate proposed a shared 'multi-organisational' newsletter, run along the general lines of the volunteer recruitment project last year. Several organisations working with homeless people in Bristol would work together to produce a newsletter which would complement the usual 'in-house' newsletters produced by each organisation.

Martin suggested that this newsletter could become an annual event, produced like the current Caring at Christmas newsletter and sharing the same general standard and design. The overall theme of the newsletter would be homelessness in general, but we would aim to cover one or two more specific topics in some detail each time.

There would be no specific plans to circulate the newsletter, but each of the participating organisations would circulate it through their usual distribution channels. Some of the organisations would contribute articles, but while examples of working with homeless people might be taken from individual organisations, the aim would be to promote a better understanding of homelessness and the related issues, rather than promote the work of any particular organisations.

Caring at Christmas are prepared to underwrite the production of 2,000 or 2,500 copies, although support from other sources would be welcome. Paul Hazelden suggested that this print run would have to be increased, as Crisis Centre Ministries distributes 2,000 copies of its newsletter each quarter.

A question was asked about the problem of people and organisations receiving duplicate copies of the shared newsletter, if we each send them out to those on our mailing lists. It was suggested that some attempt might be made to 'de-duplicate' the mailing lists in some way, but this would be unlikely to happen the first year.

Martin asked if the people present thought this would be a worthwhile thing to do? There was general support for the idea, and Martin was asked to come back to the meeting with some more specific figures for production costs, number of pages, etc.

Assuming that this idea goes ahead, we would expect a working party to start pulling the details together soon after Christmas, with the aim of distributing the newsletter in March 2003. It is not too soon to start thinking about ideas for articles, identifying suitable photographs, and so on.

Training

Paul reported on the first Volunteer Training session the previous Saturday. There had been a generally good response from those who had attended. Paul circulated a sheet with the details of the response forms people had completed at the end. A few more response sheets were returned, but seemed to be broadly in line with the previous ones.

One of the issues identified on the feedback forms was the quality of the visual aids: several people thought the session would benefit from a PowerPoint presentation. Paul had tried to organise this, but had failed. It was suggested that he should be able to borrow a suitable projector from Woodlands, and Paul promised to explore this. He asked if anyone knew of any other possible source that they let him know.

It was asked whether volunteers should be given the opportunity to pay for whole training

series at the start? It would be usual to offer a small discount for doing this. Paul had considered the possibility, but not done it for two reasons. Firstly, it seemed a bit much to ask people to pay upfront for a series when we are putting it together for the first time and do not know how well received it would be. And, secondly, we are only just covering the minimum costs anyway, and any discount would mean that we are operating at a loss. It was thought that next year, we could charge a higher fee per session and offer a discount for the series.

It was also asked whether it would be possible to run the whole series in outlying places such as Backwell and Nailsea? Paul thought that if a sufficient number of people were willing to attend in those locations, it may well be possible, but we probably ought to run a complete series before starting to move to multiple locations.

It was reported that one church has made this training programme compulsory for its volunteers and, much to their surprise, there had been no opposition to this policy.

Dorothy has agreed to put together a proposal for some First Aid training for volunteers: she will report back on this to the next meeting.

Volunteer Recruitment

There was a wide-ranging discussion of volunteer recruitment, some of the highlights of which are reproduced here.

Church Attitudes

A common feeling is that ‘church’ (that is, almost every church, from any denomination) does not promote this kind of activity: the church does not publicise it very well, does not endorse the importance or value of such work, and does not honour those who do it. Working to help homeless people is seen, in general, as something outside the scope of normal church activity, and therefore as irrelevant.

Needless to say, those present thought this position is wrong and unhelpful, and considered that we need to work/pray/campaign to change this misunderstanding. As one person said, “the church needs to learn to face outwards.”

Paul noted that this is the subject of one of the volunteer training sessions next year, so it may be useful to try and get some church leaders along to this session.

Effective Promotion

Several people have found that one of the best ways to recruit new volunteers is to visit a homegroup (/housegroup/cell group) and talk about what volunteers do, and the work of the wider organisation.

It was noted that, on their own, notices on boards and in monthly bulletins do nothing. They can help to establish a level of familiarity with the project or work being promoted, so that more specific forms of contact may be more successful.

Most people agreed that personal contact is, for most people, what counts. For this to be effective, you need to communicate more than the facts of the needs and the opportunities to contribute to the work – you have to communicate both vision and personal excitement about

the work.

In this context, it is usually more helpful if the speaker, while being passionate about his or her own work and area of activity, also talks about a broader range of issues and activities – both placing his or her own activity into a wider context, and also opening the door to the possibility of involvement in a wider range of activities. It is more important that we contribute to the building of God's Kingdom than we raise support and volunteers for our own specific project.

Some churches (Christchurch and Woodlands were mentioned as examples) have a regular 'volunteer fair' where a number of organisations put up stands with photographs, literature, promotional activities, etc. This was felt to be a worthwhile activity that does a lot to raise the profile of these projects, even if it does not generate a great many new recruits.

Other Approaches

Aspire sent out an email to a large number of churches and organisations, asking for support in a number of forms. There had been some response to requests for office furniture and equipment, but no response at all to the requests for volunteers. It was again observed that we need to touch peoples' hearts and motivate them. This is related to the old marketing principle that you have to sell the benefits of a product, not the features.

Paul noted that Bible College students often want to get involved in some form of practical activity – maybe partly as a reaction to the vast amount of academic and theoretical work they have to do. Perhaps we can target the Bible Colleges more effectively than we do at present? Paul has had useful contact with students from both Trinity and Anchor colleges in the past few months.

Several people thought that young people are, in general, keen and motivated, but not sure what they can do. There is a general issue about using 16-18 year olds in our line of work – they need parental consent (before they help homeless people of course, but also before they undertake training). At Christchurch, they sometimes go out at lunchtimes with the adults.

Numerous university students are already involved in activities to help the elderly: perhaps others may have an interest in the homeless. Aspire have been offered a stall at the freshers' fair, and it may be possible for BCAN to have one as well. Paul Tipler will contact Bristol University and the CU there to explore these possibilities.

Another strategy would be to look for more volunteers from outside the Churches. Organisations such as 'Bristol Cares' could get companies involved in encouraging people (perhaps their own staff) to become involved. Peter Halsey talks to Christian groups within companies: perhaps this link could be pursued.

Martin informed the meeting that Caring at Christmas have booked a display stand at Cribbs Causeway on October 26: they will report back to the next meeting on how successful this proved to be.

What to Say

A little time was given to considering what we say when publicising our activities and the need we have for volunteers. We need to recognise the reality of individual call and vocation: some people (maybe most people!) are not called to work as a volunteer with the homeless.

One thing we can say, though, is: please pray for us, and pray about your response to these needs. Everyone is called to do something.

Simply producing and distributing information is not enough: you also have to work at keeping this information fresh. Publicity which is clearly out of date can be counter-productive and put people off.

Final Thoughts

Whatever other publicity and promotional activities we engage in, personal contact is clearly the most effective way. The best people to recruit new volunteers are the existing volunteers – so maybe we ought to give some thought about how we can help them do this important work.

And, finally, we need the church leaders to confirm and identify our basic message: that social action is a vital part of the Christian life.

Other Business

CRB Checks

A question was asked about the current use of CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks. Several groups consider them to be important, because we work with vulnerable adults. Crisis Centre Ministries is exploring the best way to handle the checks: having checks performed on all the volunteers is likely to be expensive as well as time-consuming. Caring at Christmas supervisors all go through the CRB checks, but not the other volunteers at present. Elim use CPAS for child workers – this is a cost-effective approach because they already belong to CPAS, but would be expensive otherwise.

It was noted that, whether or not CRB checks are undertaken, it is important always to follow up the references people give.

Volunteers

The application and induction process is difficult to get right: we do not want to make the process so long and complicated that we put people off, but on the other hand, if people are put off by a reasonable amount of paperwork and preparation, are they really suitable to be volunteers? Paul Hazelden said that Crisis Centre Ministries has a reasonably comprehensive set of material in their 'Volunteer Application Pack,' but few people seem to read it. Consequently, CCM are moving towards providing all the volunteer information on single sheets (one or two sides) of A4.

The meeting was warned of the danger of establishing a contract with volunteers. One volunteer was given training by Relate, then they had problems and were dismissed. They took Relate to court for unfair dismissal. We need to clarify the basis on which training is provided and expenses are claimed.

Magazine

A charitable magazine called 'Third Sector' was recommended.

Future Meetings

As we have agreed to meet on the Thursday evening following the second Saturday of every other month, the next few meetings will be 14 November, 16 January and 13 March.

Shared Documents

Some policy and other documents were made available for people to pick up. These included:

- Volunteer Training 2002-2003 – BCAN and CCM
- Shared Guidelines – Outreach Work
- Shared Guidelines – Bristol Soup Run Trust Code of Practice
- Shared Guidelines – Cold Weather Group Volunteer Handbook extracts
- Client Details – Caring at Christmas
- Feedback Form – Caring at Christmas
- Membership Form – Voscur
- Accommodation in Bristol for Homeless People – CCM
- Food in Bristol for Homeless People – CCM
- Confidentiality Policy – CCM

If anyone would like a copy of one or more of these documents, they are available from the Crisis Centre office, and on the Crisis Centre web site.

Next Meeting

The next meeting has been arranged for Thursday 14 November 2002, 7.30 pm, City Road Baptist Church (side entrance). Apart from considering the First Aid training, we will look at publicity and (if there is time) also fundraising.