Community Network:
Partnership working to address inequalities

How can we strengthen partnership working to address inequalities within Bedford Borough?

Tuesday 18 November, 6.30–8.30PM

BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

CVS

Summary Report

Introduction

This report summarises the latest Community Network Event, which brings together partners from across the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector for shared learning, information exchange and collaborative problem-solving. This session built on the insights gathered at the anti-poverty–focused event held in July, continuing the conversation on how partners and the Council can respond to growing pressures affecting our communities. *The report from the previous event in July can be found [here](#).*

51 individuals representing 32 organisations attended, reflecting the breadth and commitment of the sector during a period of significant financial strain. Despite the challenging context for both the Council and VCSE partners, the event provided a constructive space for open discussion, collective reflection and practical next steps.

The following summary outlines the presentations that were delivered and the key themes, concerns and opportunities identified that will shape our ongoing partnership work.

Background: what we heard about tackling poverty

The previous Community Network Event highlighted that poverty is woven through housing, health, education, employment and community life - so solutions must be just as interconnected. Participants called for better use of existing partnership forums, stronger community voice, improved skills and understanding across professionals, and practical tools such as shared directories. The overarching message was clear: progress will rely on honest collaboration, compassionate culture change, and a sustained commitment to working collectively.

In response to the call to strengthen existing Forums and networks, this event focused on partnership working and inequality aimed to present some of the work that is happening in Council and partner forums – inviting other organisations to feed into join the workstreams that feed directly into policy-making and delivery.

Since the previous event – the CVS are also developing a webpage that can act as a directory of existing forums and networks that may be of interest to the public services, service providers, VCSEs and active members of the community: https://www.cvsbeds.org.uk/networks

The question that we are currently reflecting on with our partners is '***How can existing forums/networks be better connected to address inequality?***'

Hearing from health-focused networks

Strong Communities Implementation Group (SCIG)

The SCIG is a working group that addresses the 'strong communities' building block of health, which is identified as a priority within the Bedford Borough Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy. For many communities in Bedford Borough, the building blocks of health are missing or weak (e.g. employment, sufficient income, stable housing, a good education) often leading to residents experiencing poverty and health inequalities. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Vision is designed to improve the health and wellbeing of people across Bedford Borough, with particular emphasis on improving health and wellbeing most quickly for the residents and communities experiencing the worst health outcomes. In the short term this means putting changes in place that will make important and lasting differences in the future. The Strong Communities building block within the strategy sets out the ambition that everyone living in Bedford Borough has the level of meaningful social contact that they want to have, and that the work of community and voluntary sector organisations is joined-up with the services offered by the local authority and the NHS. This means keeping residents informed about services and opportunities across Bedford Borough, including those from the voluntary and community sector.

If you would like to join the group, you can contact public health through the manager overseeing the work at Rob.Andrews@bedford.gov.uk. Achieving the ambitions will only be possible by working with local stakeholders and partners. Both the voluntary and community sector, and local communities, play a key role in developing healthy communities:

Voluntary organisations	Deliver services including those that tackle loneliness, social isolation and cost of living Can mobilise projects quickly and are able to apply for external funding not open to the statutory sector Offer unique skills and insight into local needs and subsequent solutions Are a system partner Are networked and therefore able to work in collaboration rather than in isolation Provide volunteering opportunities.
Communities	Provide insights into needs that are important to them Could contribute to solutions Create belonging through communities of interest as well as neighbourhoods Connect other community members to support Empower and generate opportunities to fulfil a civic role.

The group meet every other month, and is co-chaired by representatives the voluntary sector from Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation (BLCF) and Bedfordshire Rural Community Charity (Beds RCC). To date the group have met to discuss and agree initial work areas for delivery via task and finish groups. They are:

- To increase volunteering and volunteering opportunities

- To increase access to green and blue spaces, linking with sites of culture and heritage

- To further explore the potential development of a local 'Safe Badge' scheme.

Volunteering task and finish group:

Volunteering can play a role in building skills and confidence for individuals who face barriers to employment. This work is also linked to the employment, skills and workplace health building block of health

The group is aware that there is a monthly volunteering newsletter shared by the CVS and the Council, as well as free advertising through local publications like Beds Life Magazine and The Oracle Magazine, which feature six volunteer opportunities each month, and reach approximately 80,000 households.

The group has pulled on previous engagement and research that captures from volunteers, businesses, and organisations to better understand the data relating to volunteering, and the barriers that may stop people from, volunteering. Based on this, the group is developing a communications plan that will help share information on volunteering opportunities while also promoting organisations.

Green and blue spaces task and finish group:

This group is focused on supporting the actions set out in the strategy relating to supporting local community engagement activities that help bring people together, with a particular focus on addressing social isolation, and supporting people later in life to maintain healthy behaviours and stay socially connected. Access to green and blue spaces supports people to maintain healthy behaviours and develop social connections – improving both physical health and mental health and wellbeing.

The group is exploring how Bedford's parks, waterways and natural assets can be better linked with sites of culture and heritage across both urban and rural areas. Their work focuses on designing seasonal and one-off activities that connect residents to these spaces, with particular attention to groups who are often less reached. Activity locations are being identified through mapping existing health initiatives, green spaces, places of interest and local walking groups against key neighbourhoods. Alongside promoting wellbeing, the programme is expected to generate new volunteering opportunities and directly supports the "Sustainable and Natural Environment" building block of health, as well as the delivery of the ['Take Your Space' cultural vision for Bedford Borough 2025-30.](#)

Safe spaces task and finish group:

This group is developing a Safe Spaces training scheme to help organisations recognise when someone may be at risk, to respond confidently and compassionately, and signpost effectively. The scheme will support several wellbeing strategy aims: helping people maintain healthy behaviours and social connections, strengthening the role of community settings as places of reassurance, and supporting the Community Safety Partnership's work to reduce anti-social behaviour and increase feelings of safety.

The idea grew from conversations across local forums - including the Youth Cabinet's "Ask Angela" scheme, the Sunflower Lanyard initiative and the Supported Travel scheme - where residents described feeling unsafe or vulnerable in the town centre. The group wants to ensure that anyone, regardless of age or circumstance, can seek help from a business displaying a Safe Spaces sticker. Work is now underway with organisations and residents to co-design short training packs for local businesses. Any organisations or individuals with expertise or lived experience in areas including SEND, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health, young people, dementia and safeguarding are encouraged to get involved.

Health and Housing Partnership

The Health and Housing Partnership was launched in April 2022, jointly funded by Public Health and local housing associations across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton including Amplius Housing Group, Peabody and BPHA. The partnership aims to create a new model of working that strengthens health equity by recognising that many of the most influential factors shaping health; such as income, stability, safety and quality of housing—sit outside the direct control of traditional health services.

Housing is a key building block of health, and both where and how people live having a profound effect on wellbeing. More than 80,000 people living in social housing across Bedfordshire, almost half of them in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods. Working closely with landlords is essential for reducing health inequalities. Through strong partnership working, housing associations and local authority landlords play a vital role in improving access to services, identifying emerging needs, and supporting residents who may otherwise be overlooked.

The partnership is improving the reach of health and wellbeing support by connecting services more effectively to communities experiencing the poorest outcomes. Partners are encouraged to get involved by joining the network, sharing data and insights to help

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design targeted interventions, collaborating on public health campaigns such as immunisation and smoking cessation, supporting local wellbeing events, and championing the message that good health begins at home.

The partnership network is open to all VCSEs that support residents, as the work is not just about housing, or health – both are connected through shared goals and common language. The partnership sits alongside the Choose You project, which sets out to support residents struggling to stop smoking, manage their weight, manage their drug and alcohol use, maintain their mental wellbeing, and access local sexual health support. To join, please contact karen.howkins@milton-keynes.gov.uk.

ISSUE	WHY HOUSING	WHY HEALTH
Smoking	Arrears reduction Managed Fire Safety Risk Asset Management Costs	Smoking is the main cause of preventable disease and premature death Reduced hospital admissions
Mental Health & Wellbeing	Tenancy Sustainment Hoarding Sustainable employment	Severe Mental illness cause reduced life expectancy Negative Impacts on physical health
Weight Management and Physical Activity	Resident feedback that weight impacts on daily life Reduced confidence to apply for jobs	Excess weight increases risk of chronic diseases It is associated with anxiety and depression
Drug and Alcohol	Cuckooing & County Lines Violence & Anti-Social Behaviour Neighbourhood Satisfaction	Reduced life expectancy Increased risk of liver disease and cancer Depression and mental health issues

Integrated Neighbourhood Working Group

The Integrated Neighbourhood Working (INW) group brings together health, care, voluntary, community and faith partners to plan and deliver more joined-up, person-centred support for residents across Bedford Borough. Rooted in ways of working already familiar to the VCFSE sector, INW aims to organise support around local populations (typically 30,000 to 50,000 residents) so that services feel more coordinated, accessible and responsive to people's lives.

Within the NHS context, INW focuses on key principles: multi-disciplinary collaboration, proactive and preventative care, shared leadership and accountability, and empowering communities to shape local services. This includes bringing together primary care, community health, mental health, social care and the voluntary sector into neighbourhood-level teams that can spot needs early, reduce avoidable hospital admissions and address the wider determinants of health.

The BLMK ICB Bedford Borough place team established its Integrated Neighbourhood Working Steering Group in November 2024. The group provides a forum for partners to set local priorities, share insight and best practice, strengthen coordination, and drive integration across health and social care. Examples of effective neighbourhood working already underway include the Learning and Action Network (LAN), Age Care Technology, the Working Together pilot and the Maternity Social Prescriber.

A central focus of INW is tackling health inequalities. By using data and community insight, neighbourhood teams are able to identify communities experiencing poorer outcomes; often linked to poverty, housing instability, employment barriers or limited access to services, and design targeted, local interventions. INW also works to strengthen community resilience through co-design, accessible services and early help approaches that prevent crises before they escalate. Ultimately, this model aims to ensure every neighbourhood benefits from personalised care, better access, and a stronger partnership between residents and the organisations that support them.

If you would like to join the INW group contact lorraine.kavanagh@nhs.net.

Strengthening Collaboration

Following the presentations, participants took part in a group discussion focused on strengthening collaboration across existing networks. The conversation centred on three key questions: where do opportunities exist for better alignment between forums; how can community voices be more effectively woven into these structures; and which additional networks or forums partners are already part of, that should be recognised. These discussions helped surface practical ideas for improving coordination, reducing duplication, and ensuring that the experiences and insights of residents meaningfully shape how local systems work together.

1. Opportunities for Better Alignment Between Forums
Participants highlighted a strong desire for clearer coordination across existing networks. Many felt that cross-functional attendance, with key people feeding information between forums, would reduce duplication and strengthen shared learning. A recurring theme was the need for better communication about what spaces exist, what they do, and how organisations can plug in. Suggestions included online "lunch and learn" sessions, a directory or "Yellow Pages" of forums and services (akin to an expanded Treacle offer), and a central, up-to-date signposting platform accessible to all professionals. This echoes the themes raised at the previous anti-poverty event, which informed the decision to focus this session on strengthening partnership structures. The CVS directory developed since then is an early response to that request and should be kept up to date with the support of the sector.

Several groups noted that smaller organisations often feel disconnected from strategic conversations and asked for clearer visibility of processes and outcomes to help build trust. Some partners also raised practical structural barriers - for example, services like the Fire Service having to attend multiple versions of the same meeting across different geographies - suggested that a joint cross-area annual event could be beneficial for all. The group also raised gaps in current provision: employment, skills and education are not being sufficiently covered; homelessness voices are missing; gambling-related harms need attention; and foodbanks should be included in conversations about health inequalities. Many felt that work needs to move towards clearer, time-bound action plans informed by existing research and data.

Partners recognised that not all ideas can be taken forward immediately, but highlighted the importance of being transparent about what is possible and where there are constraints.

2. Ensuring Community Voices Meaningfully Feed Into These Structures

Participants stressed that community insight must be designed into the system, not bolted on. Strong suggestions included lived experience panels, focus groups alongside formal consultations, and better communication back to communities about what has changed as a result of their input. People also emphasised the need to use familiar community settings for meetings, improve accessibility, and invest in outreach roles that can build relationships on residents' terms - including evenings and weekends.

There was appetite for new, simple channels for residents to share concerns or get information (such as an email/WhatsApp/app linked to tenancies), harnessing AI to help analyse trends. Improving representation was a key theme, including engaging minority and faith groups, involving people from disability communities, and linking with community cafés and foodbanks. Attendees also highlighted the importance of leveraging testimonies and service-user perspectives, learning from previous research, and ensuring that communities can influence decisions without navigating complex systems.

3. Other Forums and Networks to Be Aware Of

Partners identified a wide range of forums that could support better alignment, including:

- Bedford Family Forum
- BLMK Mental Health Forum
- Live Longer Better
- DWP Transition Forum
- Black African and Caribbean Community Group
- Cultural Minority Community Group
- National forums such as Cambridge Ahead and related development forums
- NHS Race Equality Steering Forum
- Bedford Blues Foundation Forum
- African and Caribbean Forum
- Suicide Prevention Board.

These spaces were seen as potential pipelines for shared learning, representation, and more coordinated action.

Conclusion and next steps

The discussions at this event reaffirmed that tackling inequality in Bedford Borough requires stronger alignment across existing forums, more intentional involvement of community voices, and better visibility of the work already taking place across the system. Partners were clear that collaboration must move beyond information-sharing toward coordinated action, transparent processes and accessible routes for residents and smaller organisations to shape decisions.

The ideas and insights shared will inform how the Council, ICB, and VCSE partners refine existing structures, develop clearer signposting tools, and ensure that the experiences of communities remain central. The following areas reflect early actions and considerations based on what we heard. Some will require cross-boundary collaboration or additional resourcing, so partners will work together to prioritise what is realistic and achievable.

Next steps include (but are not limited to):

- **Improve communication on existing forums:** This report will support the CVS in adding to their directory of forums and networks, but all organisations should share further details of forums and networks to the CVS to include in the directory that they are developing
- **Organisations should join strategic forums where there is alignment:** This is where the actions and detail sit – we cannot include all detail on all forums in these Community Network Events, but hopefully informing you of the work that is happening will encourage you to get involved where it is appropriate for your organisation to be part of the planning and delivery of community work
- **Increase transparency for smaller organisations** by sharing processes, decisions and outcomes from strategic forums. Future Community Network events will focus on sharing strategic insights were appropriate, and lunch and learn sessions can be explored with partners in 2026

- **Explore cross-area collaboration** e.g. a joint annual Bedford–Central Beds–Luton networking day to reduce duplication for services working across boundaries: Bedford Borough Council Community Engagement Officer will reach out to Luton and Central Bedfordshire to explore if there is an interest in this.

We will continue to refine this work with partners and ensure that future Community Network Events provide updates on progress and invite honest reflection on what is and isn't working.