

Bedford Open Door History

By: Liz Mines, Counsellor and Trustee at Bedford Open Door 1995-2006

I have been asked to write a brief history of Bedford Open Door as I have been a counsellor here since we opened in September 1995. I have also been a trustee for the organisation, but only since October 2004, so my recollections are mainly from the counselling point of view.

Bedford Open Door was the brainchild of Winnie Manning, a Youth Worker with Bedfordshire County Council. Winnie was based in Biddenham Upper School and found that during the course of her working day many young people would come to her office to talk about difficult issues in their lives. It was not possible in the Youth Worker's office to ensure the confidentiality needed for this sensitive work and the idea of an independent agency for counselling young people was born.

I had met Winnie on a 3 year counselling course at the Herts and Beds Counselling Centre (renamed Bedford Counselling Centre), affiliated to the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. We had kept in touch after completing the course and I became involved in the plans for Bedford Open Door.

Many people were involved in setting up the organisation, Bedfordshire County Council taking the lead role, and Winnie had a portion of her working hours seconded to working with Bedford Open Door. Bedfordshire County Council's Youth Service have continued to support us with funding and premises, enabling our CRB checks for staff and in many other ways over the eleven years we have been in existence. Other organisations involved were Relate, the Youth Offending Team, Bedford Hospital's Clinical Psychology Service who provided us with free supervision for one of our supervision groups and consultation with their Director, Dr Georgina Cuthbertson (now retired) who took clinical responsibility for the project.

I was interviewed for the post of counsellor by a panel of three people, Bedfordshire County Council's Head of Youth Service, the Manager of Relate and one other professional counsellor whose name I am afraid I have forgotten. Much work went into forming a management committee and finding trustees. We had a formal launch for Bedford Open Door in September 1995 at the Polish Club in Ashburnham Road and Peter Wilson, then Director of Young Minds was our guest speaker and gave an inspirational address on the vital need for a local youth counselling organisation and the pressures experienced by young people. The local press attended and radio interviews were broadcast on Three Counties Radio.

Our first premises were in Ashburnham Road, on the first floor of a large house opposite the Polish Club, with easy access to the station and town. The premises were kindly donated by a local computer firm Star West. The rooms were large and pupils from Biddenham Upper School chose the colourful curtain material and sewed them for us – we still use them today! The reception area was rather cramped and not ideal and we had one rather chilly toilet. Reception workers had to descend the stairs to let clients in, which was also not ideal. We were very lucky indeed to have the expertise of Barney Wild, who was very experienced in working with young people on the ASSIST team (pupils excluded from school or unable to attend for other reasons) of the Education Department at Bedfordshire County Council. Barney was a Trustee as well as receptionist and generally gave his heart and soul to BOD. Sadly he died from cancer a few years ago at the age of 51.

Bedford Open Door moved to 30 Grove Place after a diligent search by Trustees. We now rented a small terraced house near to the centre of Bedford, but discreetly tucked away, which clients appreciated. We were quite comfortable in Grove Place and did after a while share the accommodation and rent with The Grove Pregnancy

Service, another Bedford charity, though we never met during the course of our work as our opening hours were completely separate. We were very sad when our landlords SDC decided to sell the property and it is now a private residence.

We had to find more premises quickly and once again Bedfordshire County Council came to our rescue, generously offering to share their Youth Service premises named Interface in Gadsby Street with us, at no cost to ourselves, instead of giving us the annual grant which had paid our rent at Grove Place. It was rather crowded however and as more staff moved in from County Hall, we had to find somewhere for ourselves for the longer term. It wasn't easy, but we were very pleased indeed to have the opportunity to rent part of Park Woodfine's ground floor offices in Lurke Street. We moved in at Easter time and once again everybody rallied round, counselling rooms were put in place with room dividers and we redecorated. Winnie and Sam Hillyard (receptionist and Trustee who gave so much of herself to Bedford Open Door, before very sadly dying from Cystic Fibrosis at the age of 30 a couple of years ago) worked hard refurbishing the premises and clients pronounced it 'cool'.

Bedford Open Door has always had a high profile and respect from statutory and non-statutory agencies and been part of various forums including Bedfordshire County Council's Children and Young Peoples' Services and RAP (Raising Awareness Programme) which was a charitable umbrella organisation for all organisations working with young people, including Bedfordshire Police, the Samaritans, Youth Offending Team and various Bedfordshire Schools. This programme discontinued when its coordinators moved on from Bedfordshire. We then worked in partnership with Connexions and Beds County Council Youth Service.

In 2001 Winnie obtained a grant to set up a pilot telephone helpline from Bedford Open Door's premises called Youthline Beds. Winnie and I trained as supervisors with the Telephone Helplines Association and guidelines and policies were put in place. The scheme ran for a few months as a pilot scheme, but though the callers who contacted us found the service very helpful, we had few calls and it appeared that young people seem to prefer face to face counselling. Fewer young people had mobile phones at that time. (It is interesting to note that CALM, a helpline set up specifically for young men, with a £45,000 start-up government grant and high profile publicity, also folded through lack of funding).

Funding is crucial to BOD's future. We have always been very fortunate with the generosity of our funders, who recognised the need for our service and appreciated that young people are the future and their well-being needs investment. The evidence that they appreciate a confidential, non-judgemental service staffed by volunteers and well qualified counsellors speaks for itself, as we continue to receive new referrals daily. GPs in particular are very pleased to have our service available for their young patients who are suffering from depression and anxiety.

I am sure I have left gaps in this potted history, and I apologize if I have left anything of major significance out. Winnie left the organisation a couple of years ago to move to the West country where she continues her youth work, but her legacy of Bedford Open Door continues to thrive. Voluntary organisations see a turnover of staff over the years for many reasons, but the ethos and passion for the counselling work with young people continues to attract staff. The strength of the goodwill and commitment to the service and its young clients by volunteer staff is invaluable and without it Bedford Open Door would not be the welcoming environment it is and always has been.

Dec 2006

January 2007-onwards

Liz Mines left Bedford Open Door in January 2007 to retire near the sea with her husband. Her calm, confident manner is still very much missed in the organisation.

For some time the Trustees had been looking at the subject of premises, given the there had already been several moves since its inception. Don Stevenson (then Chair of Trustees) put forward the idea of purchasing a property to secure the future of the service. By this time Karen Foxhall had been taken on as Fundraiser for the service and she was confident that the money could be raised once the formal decision had been taken and a Business Plan had been undertaken, Writing a Business Plan is not simple but much hard work went on during 2007 and towards the end of the year it was completed.

In November 2007 Karen became aware of some potential funding which could help to secure a building – the catch was that we had to find and purchase a property before March 2008! During December several houses, including 120 Tavistock Street, had been viewed as potential premises and just before Christmas an offer was put in for this building. The offer was accepted but the real work had only just begun! In the meantime our landlord at Lurke Street indicated that they would like us to move out in the New Year so new offices were found and in January 2008 we moved into St Cuthbert's Street on a year contract.

Planning permission for 'change of use' from domestic to commercial premises was required before formal purchase of the property could begin. This is a fairly lengthy procedure and had to go before the Bedford Borough Planning Committee. On March 18th 2008 planning permission was granted leaving us free to go ahead with the purchase. Bedford Open Door was very fortunate to have the support and guidance of the Planning Department staff, the excellent legal services of Steve Williamson at Park Woodfine Heald Mellows and the patience of the previous owners of the property who waited whilst we obtained the planning permission.

Funding for a large part of the purchase came from Bedfordshire and Luton Economic Development Partnership, funded by the East of England Development Agency and the remaining amount through a loan with the Charity Bank. Once purchased, we then began fundraising for the second stage – refurbishment.

The services of John Creasey (architect) were sought for the design of the property to give a layout which catered for Bedford Open Door's present requirements and future plans. This needed to include disabled access to a downstairs counselling room and appropriate toilet facilities. A meeting room which could be used for meetings and training events and could be hired out to bring in extra revenue was included, as well as a separate waiting room and more counselling rooms. In addition the top floor of the building would be rented out to another organisation/business.

Fundraising began in earnest once plans had been finalised and estimates received. Funds were guaranteed in late 2008 and finally in January 2009 the contractors Meadway moved in to begin the refurbishment work with a 16 week project planned.

On April 27th 2009 Bedford Open Door finally moved into its own premises and on May 5th the first clients were seen. On September 21st 2009 the building will be officially opened, giving us a chance to celebrate with many people who have supported us along the way.

Many thanks must go all who have offered funding towards the purchase and refurbishment of the new building. Also to Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire Councils who have helped to keep the service running in order to serve the young people of Bedfordshire.

A special THANK YOU must go to the Volunteer Counsellors who give of their time in order to help the young people – without them we would not have a service. Also the Trustees who have the vision for the service and work hard to ensure its survival and future growth.

September 2009