

Befrienders Highland Limited (BHL) - Convenor's Annual Report

2017/18

Introduction This has been another very successful year for BHL. All of the existing services have been maintained and are thriving. There has been growth and development, with face-to-face befriending extended into one new area and preparations being made for expansion into another. The range and size of BHL's group work activities have both increased. And growth has continued in the Memory Loss and Carers part of our services.

Training of staff and volunteers in the Recovery Focus approach was largely complete by the start of this year and the concentration has turned to implementation.

The underlying financial pressures arising from continuing austerity measures in the public sector continue. BHL's annual award from NHS Highland continues to be frozen at the 2008 cash figure minus 5% and we are already aware that this policy will be extended into 2018/19. In fact, a major review of NHS Highland's funding of the Third Sector was announced in December 2017 and no guarantees are being given of funding beyond March 2019. The BHL Board continue therefore to have concerns about the organisation's finances in the longer term. The already-secured Big Lottery Foundation funding gives reasonable security for most of BHL's present services until late in 2021 but the picture is much less clear beyond then and this is a real cause for anxiety.

This report will discuss management arrangements for the service, its change of premises, the developments in services linked to Big Lottery Foundation award and developments in other parts of BHL's services. It will also report on Board matters and on BHL's finances.

Management Arrangements Because of continuing financial constraints, BHL has maintained the reduction made in 2015 to the hours of the Executive Director to a 3 days a week post. Keith Walker continued in this post throughout the year. He has continued to be a great asset to the service with a wealth of knowledge, experience and contacts throughout the local voluntary and public sectors. His management style suits the organisation very well and the Board has a good sense of a happy group of staff and volunteers.

The potential workload of this post in a service which is expanding in size and complexity could certainly justify the return of this to being a full-time post and some hard decisions have had to be made at times about the priorities for the Executive Director's attention. But this is a widespread feature of posts in the voluntary and public sectors and likely to remain so. The Executive Director has been flexible in how he works his hours in order to meet the needs of the service, for which I am very grateful. Any impact on the quality of BHL's

services has been minimal even if the timescales for some more strategic matters have had to be extended.

Office Premises Notice of the termination of the lease of BHL's office in Church Street was received during 2016/17. Following an investigation of alternatives, a shortlist of three properties was made and the final choice was to move to Academy House, Academy Street, Inverness. The removal took place in June.

The rent of the new office was considerably higher than in the previous premises but the former rent reflected the poor condition and access of that office and the Academy House rent was very similar to that of its competitors. Larger offices were needed in any case because of staff increases pending, linked to the Big Lottery Foundation award. The whole service, and staff particularly, have benefited from this move to modern, well-heated office accommodation. Lift access has greatly improved accessibility for BHL's friends and volunteers and given BHL accommodation which is fully compliant with Disability Discrimination legislation for the first time. The location is very central and convenient.

There were long delays in getting telephone landline and broadband services installed in the new office and this was a source of great frustration for several months. These matters were resolved by the end of 2017. The Board thanks our staff and all BHL's members for their patience and tolerance during this time.

Service Development

Linked to the Big Lottery Foundation award

The targets which BHL committed to as conditions of receiving this award were principally to incorporate targets from the Scottish Recovery Programme into the goals of our befriending relationships, to extend the availability of face/face befriending to new areas of the Highlands and to increase the total number of friendships being offered.

All of these targets were achieved. Incorporating Scottish Recovery goals into our friendships has happened very successfully, with Volunteers reinvigorated by clearer purposes. This development fits in very well with NHS Highland objectives and should strengthen BHL's eligibility for continuing funding. A new, part-time Volunteer Coordinator has been employed in Caithness and had already established her first face/face matches before the end of the year.

In Other Parts of the Service

The early trials of face/face befriending in the Memory Loss service were very successful and have continued and expanded this year. Numbers have grown to plan in this area. This service has begun to offer support, information and friendship to carers more generally and not to restrict this to the carers for individuals being befriended by BHL Volunteers.

The range and size of the groups which meet have both increased and this looks a very promising area of development. We have been asked to consider including people in some of these groups who are not involved in individual friendships and this is something which could develop in the coming year.

Finances The continuing impact of austerity measures in the public sector on BHL's finances was referred to in the Introduction. The continued freezing of the amount for BHL's core funding is steadily eroding the real value of this award. The funding for the services BHL offers in Argyll and Bute was reduced by almost half in 2016 and continues at this level. The announcement of a radical review of NHS funding to the Voluntary Sector has to cause anxiety.

BHL has recognised for several years that it is unwise and unrealistic to rely too heavily on the public sector for funding and has made great efforts to diversify. This has had significant success and created reserves which offer some protection or compensation for shortfalls elsewhere. BHL began this financial year with unprecedentedly good reserves of £132,465. Inevitably, given the other shortfalls, BHL has had to draw on its reserves to some extent in the present financial year. Reserves were reduced to £114,924. This means that expenditure exceeded income by £17,541. This remains in line with BHL's reserves policy of maintaining these at the cost of between 6 and 9 months of operations. But this is still a worrying trend and is likely to require serious new fundraising efforts in the near future.

One of the elements of uncertainty is the funding of BHL's services for people with Memory Loss and for Carers. Funding agreements for the NHS contribution to this service are less clear and definite than for other areas and the level of service which can be sustained will need to be kept under review.

The BHL Board Jane Macdonald, Nick Curley, Shane Spence, Scott Adie (Treasurer) and David Stallard (Convenor) served as BHL Directors throughout the year.

In January, we held an Away Day for the Board and took time to consider its strengths and weaknesses as a governing body for the organisation. We concluded that it generally worked very well but identified two areas for development. 1) Women are clearly under-represented and the Board will take steps to address this in the coming year. 2) Most areas of knowledge or skill are represented but it would be good to recruit someone with a Communications or PR background.

Conclusion BHL has performed well during this year and achieved all of its main targets. I am very grateful for the financial support BHL has received from three different parts of NHS Highland in the face of many competing demands. I am similarly grateful to the Big Lottery Foundation for their generous support and to the various other grant-making bodies which support BHL's work.

BHL continues to be in a position to sustain and develop its services. The value of these is evident from the monitoring of the outcomes of the friendships which take place and from what we are told by Friends and Volunteers alike.

BHL has an excellent group of members; friends, volunteers and staff and we on the Board are very grateful to them all. It is a pleasure to be a part of this service and of all that it does.

David Stallard, Convenor, Befrienders Highland Limited

23 August, 2018