

# RAN Advice Forum Report

## 'Networking'

April 2, 2025

### Introduction

1 This Forum continued a pattern established last year, that the first Forum of the year would begin with short presentations by a small number of member organisations about their services, but would primarily ensure that there was a significant amount of time made available to enable those attending to network with each other.

2 The Forum began with a welcome by Richard Harrison, RAN Chair, and the award of certificates to three member organisations:

- Richard awarded the RAN Quality Standard to Mike Edwards, on behalf of ABC to read
- Herjeet Vass from RVA awarded their 'Safe and Sound' Standard to Vic Latchford on behalf of Citizens Advice Reading, and to Nick Harborne on behalf of Refugee Support Group.

### Presentations

3 Four RAN member organisations - The Mustard Tree, Citizens Advice Reading, Graft and Reading Students Union - then gave short presentations about their work, which are summarised below. The presentations they used, which give more detailed information, are attached alongside this report.

#### **A The Mustard Tree**

4 Katherine Shepherd explained that The Mustard Tree provided a number of services, but that her presentation would focus on RAHAB - the support service they provide to sex workers. In 2024, 18 of their volunteers provided support to 63 service users. Many of the service users have experienced abuse or other trauma in their early life and feel very isolated. RAHAB volunteers are friendly, use a trauma-informed approach, and work hard to get alongside their service users and build trust, often just by doing small things that they have promised to do. She gave a list of the possible signs that a woman might be involved in the sex industry and experiencing 'survival sex', and suggested a number of questions that colleagues in other organisations might ask their service users if they felt it might be appropriate to start or develop a conversation about this. RAHAB offers training in sexual exploitation awareness and she invited organisations to get in touch if they were interested.

#### **B Citizens Advice Reading**

5 Vic Latchford explained that Citizens Advice Reading was part of a wider Citizens Advice structure, and that their work had two aims - to help individual service users with their problems, and to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. Currently they are open five days a week for pre-booked appointments, offer a telephone Adviceline service three days a week, and are open two days a week for walk-in callers. She described the approach they used and the training, supervision and quality assurance that underpins it. They have specialist teams dealing with debt, benefits and energy, a general team dealing with other issues, and a remote team providing help to claim

Universal Credit. She concluded by explaining the different ways people could access their services.

### **C Graft**

6 Clare Hepburn explained that Graft focused on supporting disabled or otherwise disadvantaged jobseekers to find work. Their clients faced a variety of different barriers to employment. Graft aimed to get them ready for work and then to support them with job clubs and work experience placements, trying wherever possible to align these with the client's particular interests. She explained how their work experience programme, 'Bridging Horizons', operated, supporting individuals to gain skills and confidence and simultaneously providing a range of benefits for the employers involved, illustrating this with a couple of particular examples from recent clients. She concluded by listing a number of organisations currently offering work experience through 'Bridging Horizons', and asked those attending to think about whether their organisations could join the programme.

### **D Reading Students' Union**

7 Jessica Vine explained that the Students' Union is a student-led charity, independent of the University, with elected officers and employed staff. The Advice Service, through in-person and virtual appointments, and drop-in sessions, supports over 1000 students a year, and offers support in three key areas - academic issues, money and housing. They help students navigate the University's policies and procedures, give advice on money issues such as Council tax, debt, budgeting and benefits, and help with problems over landlords, rental arrangements and student accommodation. They also signpost students to other support services in the University such as counselling and wellbeing, and the welfare team.

### **Networking**

8 After the presentations had concluded, the rest of the Forum was spent networking. Fifteen of the twenty-two RAN members had set up stalls on tables around the Council Chamber and there were lots of discussions at these about current services and possible future collaboration.

### **Richard Harrison - Chair, Reading Advice Network**