



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity

**Annual Report
2022-2023**



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Message from our Chief Executive

Dear Friends and Supporters,



It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to our Annual Report for 2022-2023. I have the pleasure of serving as the Chief Executive Officer of Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, an organisation dedicated to creating lasting positive change in our communities across our county. This report is a testament to the unwavering commitment of our team and the incredible support of our volunteers and partners.

The year presented its own set of challenges, and both our rural and urban communities were not immune. The impact of the cost of living crisis, healthcare inequality and wellbeing deprivation was profound, and it highlighted the vital importance of our work. Throughout the year, we remained committed to our mission, adapting and innovating to meet the evolving needs of the communities we serve.

This Annual Report is an overview of our activities during the 2022-23 year. Within these pages, you will find examples of our projects and initiatives, the impact they have had, and some case studies of the remarkable individuals whose lives have been positively transformed by our work. It is a testament to what is possible when communities come together with a shared purpose.

We are incredibly proud of the progress we've made and the impact we have achieved, but we know there is still much work to be done. As we look ahead to next year, we remain steadfast in our commitment to connecting and caring for our communities. Our resolve is stronger than ever, and we are eager to continue making a difference in the lives of those who need it most.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to our dedicated #TeamBRCC, our brilliant volunteers and our invaluable partners. It is through your unwavering dedication that we can keep delivering our great projects enabling us to make a difference in the lives of our communities.

Thank you for being a part of the Beds RCC family and for standing with us in our mission. Together, we are making a lasting impact for our communities, and together, we will continue to drive positive change for years to come.

Tracy Cowan, Beds RCC Chief Executive

Message from our Chair



Thank you to everyone who is part of Beds RCC: staff, managers, volunteers, trustees, patrons, and contractors. I am so delighted by the many ways in which we have assisted and empowered all the clients and beneficiaries of our projects. Everyone has worked with kindness, professionalism and enthusiasm in enabling people to feel safe, supported and positively engaged in their communities. We have increased wellbeing opportunities for our staff so they can maintain their impressive contributions to improving people's lives, volunteering, work and sense of belonging. Our creativity, innovation and careful planning throughout 2022-2023 have ensured this is a strong, progressive and enormously valuable charity.

Paula Grayson, BedsRCC Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paula Grayson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



About Us

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) is the leading community development agency working across Bedfordshire, with a proven track record built up over 70 years.

Founded in 1953 as Bedfordshire Rural Community Council, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity is a member of a national network of Rural Community Councils under an umbrella organisation, Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE).

The charity's objects are:

To promote any charitable purpose for the benefit of the community primarily in the historic county of Bedfordshire, and in particular, the advancement of education, the protection of health and the relief of poverty, distress or sickness.

In furtherance of that said purpose, but not otherwise, to promote and organise cooperation in the achievement of the same and to that end to bring together representatives of the voluntary organisations and statutory authorities in the historic county of Bedfordshire.

Our mission:

BRCC exists to support local community life in Bedfordshire. Its role is as follows:

A coordinator of local community activity to enable communities to do more for themselves and reduce reliance on the state

An intermediary between public (and private) service providers and the people in local communities they need to reach

A manager of partnerships across public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve common objectives (e.g. conservation, rural economic development)

A direct provider of services (e.g. community transport) that help people to participate in the community

Who We Are

Trustees

The Trustees who are also Directors of the company who served during the financial year are as follows:

Miss Paula Grayson (Chair of the Board to March 31st 2022 and Director of BRCC Trading Services Board)

Mrs June Barnes

Mr Christopher Barker

Mr Barry George

Rev Stephen Holroyd (Resigned 29th September 2022)

Cllr Tim Hill

Mr Ian Kelly (Resigned 29th September 2022)

Mrs Ann Lovesey

Mr Eric Masih

Mr Brian Prickett

Miss Hina Shafi (Resigned 9th March 2023)

Mr Ian Riches (Also a Director of BRCC Trading Services Board)

Mrs Sukhi Kooner (Appointed 21st November 2022)

Mr Craig Smith (Appointed 21st November 2022)

Mr Tim Marcus (A Director of BRCC Trading Services Board only)

Who We Are

Officers

COMPANY SECRETARY

Mrs Tracy Cowan

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Mrs Tracy Cowan

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Mr Cliff Andrews

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

Ms Janice Janes

Mrs Kate Ellis

Mr Simon Bailes (left October 2022)

Mr Bill Simmons (from August 2022)

REGISTERED OFFICE

The Old School, Southill Road, Cardington, MK44 3SX

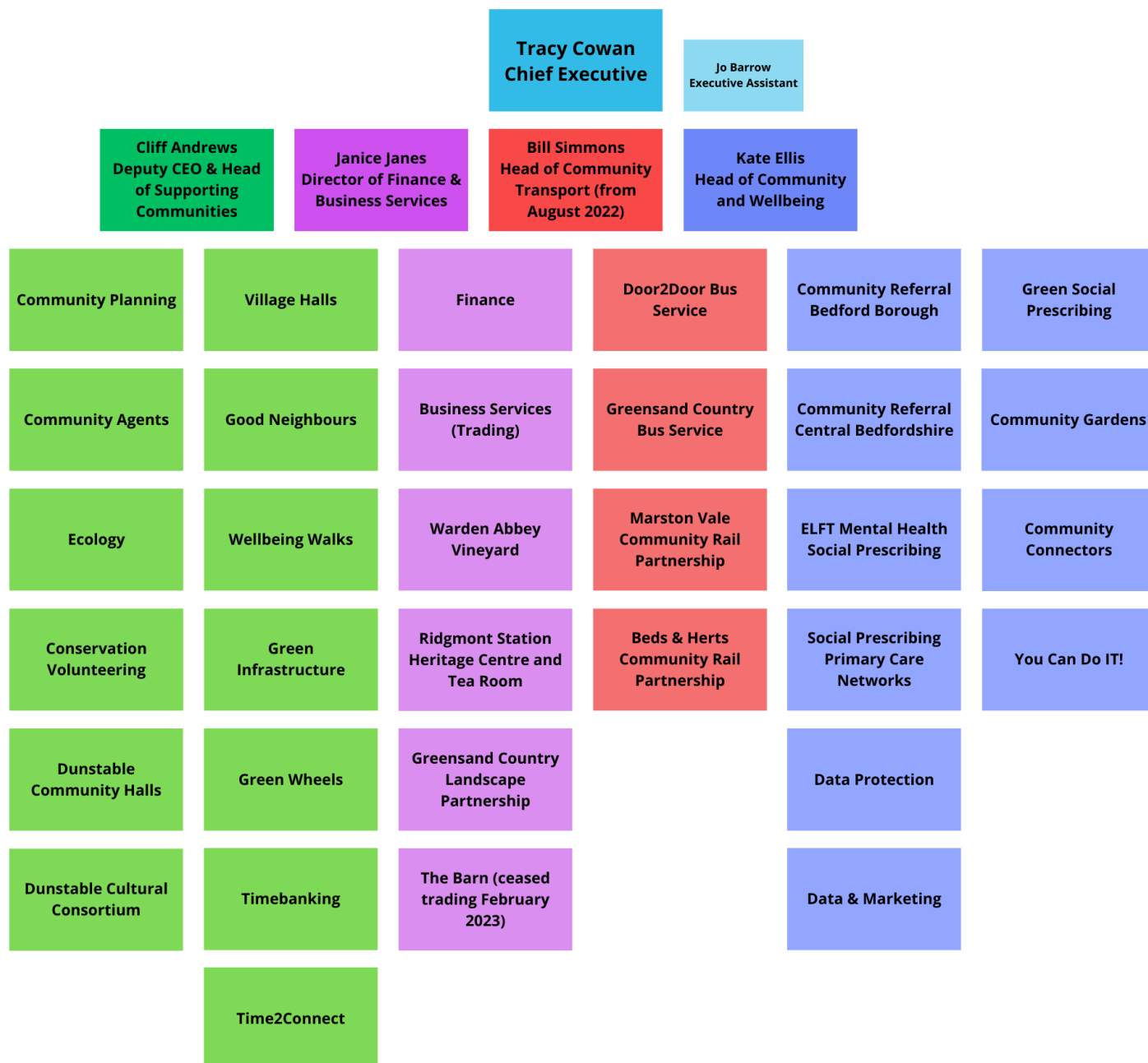
BANKERS

CAF BANK, 25 Kings Hill Avenue, Kings Hill, West Malling, Kent, ME19 4JQ

AUDITORS

Streets Chartered Accountants Potton House, Wyboston Lakes, Great North Road, Bedfordshire, MK44 3BZ

Staff Organisation Chart



Overview of the Year

During the first full year post the Covid-19 pandemic the Charity continues to grow with an expanded portfolio of activities and new staff members.

In April our Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership (MVCRP) celebrated its 15th birthday and the Marston Vale Line also continued its celebration of 175 years with a series of events. April also saw The Barn host their first Tasting Day with local small business owner Lee from Badgers Chilli Kitchen.

In May, Warden Abbey Vineyard held their two annual planting days which brought together donors, volunteers and local groups who worked together to plant and name-tag new vines.

Mental Health Awareness Week was 9th-15th May, and Beds RCC hosted two guided walks with The Barn to give people the opportunity to spend time outdoors, get to know others and discover the local area. At the end of May, Beds RCC's feature in 'Escape to the Country' aired on the BBC.

June saw Biggleswade Good Neighbour Group awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service which recognised their continued hard work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Beds RCC continues to support a network of almost 40 Good Neighbour Schemes across Bedfordshire.

In July staff, trustees, patrons and volunteers from across Beds RCC came together for the first time post Covid-19 to celebrate the hard work done in the previous year.

In August and September we took on the ownership and direct management of Dunstable Community Halls from LuBYA (Luton & Bedfordshire Youth Association). Dunstable Community Halls is a fantastic asset in the middle of Dunstable, which provides a base for our local projects, rentable space to local groups and residents, and also increases awareness of Beds RCC in the area.

September also saw the Charity win Gold at the SME Luton and Bedfordshire Business Awards in the Positive Impact category. Thanks to funding by Leighton-Linslade Town Council we were also able to create a new Community Agent post in the Leighton-Linslade area of Central Bedfordshire.



Overview of the Year

In October, celebrations were held for Silsoe Good Neighbour group 'Silsoe Offers Support' who turned 20. Over the years, the group has helped with a variety of jobs including lifts to and from appointments, befriending, collecting prescriptions, and gardening. They also host a monthly tea room to give people in the village the opportunity to gather together and enjoy tea and homemade cake.

November saw the development of our new Green Social Prescribing initiative, with the launch of our Green Wellbeing Directory, an online resource detailing opportunities across Bedfordshire for people to get active outside to support their health and wellbeing. At Ridgmont Heritage Centre and Dunstable Community Halls, new community gardens were being planned.

In December, the Charity won 'Community Business of the Year' Award at the SME National Awards for the second year running.

In January of 2023 Beds RCC started celebrating its 70th anniversary, with events planned throughout the year to mark the special occasion.

Village Halls week ran from 23rd-29th January, which celebrated the many ways these volunteer-run rural community buildings support local residents, groups and businesses, particularly during difficult times. This was a fantastic opportunity to share about how Beds RCC supports community buildings across Bedfordshire.

Dunstable Community Halls launched their new website in February, showcasing the halls, community groups, history of the halls and more.

In March, Beds RCC hosted an event to explore Green Social Prescribing in Bedfordshire. The event was supported by Grand Union Housing Group and brought together people from the environmental and the mental health sectors across Bedfordshire. This event was part of Beds RCC's programme to support and develop Green Social Prescribing in Bedfordshire, by supporting connection and capacity building among local organisations.



What We Do

As a Rural Charity we work to support our communities with a wide and varied approach across four main areas:

Supporting Communities

This area of our work focusses on the health and wellbeing of people and the environment they live in.

Under Supporting Communities we have:

- Community and Wellbeing
- Village and Community Agents
- Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network
- Housing and Planning
- Green Infrastructure
- Community Engagement
- Village/Community Halls
- Dunstable Community Halls
- Dunstable Cultural Consortium
- Voluntary Sector Support

Finance and Business Services

Our Finance and Business Services includes our finance team, marketing and IT and the Greensand Country Project team, as well as our three not-for-profit businesses:

- The Barn Cardington (ceased trading February 2023)
- Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room
- Warden Abbey Vineyard

Community Transport

Community Transport assists with the needs of people across Bedfordshire.

Under Community Transport, we have:

- Door to Door Bus Service
- Greensand Country Bus Service
- Community Rail Partnerships
- Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre

Rural Development (Paused)

SME Business Awards

Gold award at the SME Luton and Bedfordshire Business Awards

We are delighted to announce that we won gold for the Positive Impact Award at the SME Luton and Bedfordshire Business Awards in September. The Positive Impact category celebrates both Community Businesses and Not-for-Profit Organisations who have positively benefitted society.

CEO Tracy Cowan said, "To receive any award is always amazing, but to get an award for "Positive Impact" is extra special as the purpose of our lovely Charity is to be changemakers, connectors, supporters and to create a positive impact wherever we go. This award means that others have recognised that my brilliant teams do this every day and I am very proud."

Gold award at the SME National Business Awards

We are pleased to announce that we won gold in the Community Business of the Year Award category at the SME National Business Awards in December. The awards looked to recognise those small and medium-sized enterprises that had worked incredibly hard to better themselves and those around them in a year impacted by Covid-19, the cost of living crisis and many other challenges. For Beds RCC, this recognised the way in which Team BRCC have supported our local communities in and around Bedfordshire.

We previously won the Community Business of the Year award at regional and national level in 2020/21, so we were delighted to win the award at a national level again – especially considering we were up against so many hard-working and talented organisations.



Community and Wellbeing

You Can Do IT!

We continued to develop our 'You Can Do IT!' digital inclusion project, which aims to improve people's lives by getting them online and accessing services that can help with their health and wellbeing. There are now groups in Biggleswade, Putnoe, Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Bromham.

A partnership with the Recovery College has enabled a further group to be delivered as part of their Bedford Beacon drop-in offer. There is a regular drop-in session in Bedford Central Library and weekly appointments are delivered at Project 229, a major community hub in Kempston. Discussions are underway with Sandhills PCN/Sandy Town Council and Be Active Bedfordshire/Central Bedfordshire Council with a view to expanding the service further.

17 volunteers have been recruited as Digital Health Champions to provide support within the established groups and efforts are ongoing to attract more in order to expand capacity. The project has welcomed 93 learners across all groups and delivered 740 sessions of individual tuition. Funding is currently scheduled to end on 31st March 2024.

Social Prescribing

Our Community Referral (Social Prescribing) service supports adults across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire to make life changes to support their health and wellbeing. The service continues to offer Self-Referral, GP referral (where we work with a Primary Care network), referrals from Statutory Organisations and our colleagues across the VCSE.

In our fifth year the service has continued to grow, we welcomed new Community Wellbeing Champions aligned to Community Mental Health Teams to deliver the service to adults experiencing an episode of serious mental illness. Our Green Social Prescribing Team have worked with service users to develop Wellbeing Activities to support their recovery.

Mental Health remains the primary reason for referral, In response to this we have focused on our community drop-ins to support residents to build confidence in group settings, making new connections and reducing isolation.

During the cost of living crisis, Community Wellbeing Champions have supported residents to access support with debt advice, food provision, fuel vouchers, affordable housing advice and more. During the past year the service has received close to 3500 referrals; creating over 15,500 contacts, 7000 onward referrals with our beneficiaries reporting the greatest improvement in Feeling Positive and Being Connected to Work / Volunteering or other Activities.

Green Social Prescribing

This was the first year in post for Nicola Scholfield, our Green Social Prescribing Officer. Her work initially focused on connecting with groups that offer opportunities for people to get active outdoors, leading to our online Green Wellbeing Directory. Within this network, she offered training in Green Social Prescribing, including an online webinar in February and conference in March.

Ongoing development of our own green offers included a programme of natural mindfulness walks, a wellbeing-focused nature conservation project and a new garden-based wellbeing group in Bedford for young men: MEET. Emma, our new Community Garden Support Officer, joined the team in November and began to plan for a new Wellbeing Garden at Dunstable Community Halls.

Village and Community Agents

Our Village Agents operate in all the villages within Bedford Borough, primarily funded by the Bedford Borough Council. This dedicated team of part-time Agents identifies individuals in hard-to-reach rural areas and assists them in enhancing their quality of life by connecting them with mainstream services or community support networks.

Furthermore, we have three Community Agents who work with specific communities in Central Bedfordshire, thanks to local funding arrangements. We also worked with Bedford Borough council to lay the groundwork for a brand new Town Agent post that would be based in Bedford and Kempston.

Overall, our team of Agents supported 1,315 individual clients, including 684 new clients. 569 home visits were undertaken during the year.



Case Study

You Can Do IT!

Our Digital Inclusion project 'You Can Do IT!' has been running since February 2022, and since then has helped a range of people across Bedfordshire to get online and access services that will improve their health and wellbeing. During the sessions, participants are shown how to use smartphones, tablets, or laptops to carry out tasks such as online shopping, joining an online activity group, video calling and more. These sessions are run by volunteer Digital Champions, and groups have been established in Biggleswade, Putnoe, Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Bromham.

Throughout the project, we have received positive feedback from many of those who have received help getting online.

Please note: names have been changed and quotes have been anonymised for confidentiality purposes.

"Stacey wanted to pass on her thanks and said she was pleased with what she has learnt meaning she has overcome some of her initial problems with using her tablet. She was happy with the service and especially receiving the 1-2-1 support which she has found to be useful."

"I wanted to say how amazing [You Can Do IT!] has been, all the staff/volunteers are super friendly and helpful. ... Doing this course has given me so much more freedom and confidence in myself. I don't have to constantly rely on others for help doing these things anymore."

After learning how to video call his niece and nephew, Mark said he felt "absolutely brilliant" and "really happy". He described You Can Do IT! as "brilliant" and urged others to give it a go.

Not only do volunteer Digital Champions improve the lives of those they help, they also feel the benefits themselves:

"After taking early retirement I was looking for something that would enable me to use my professional skills in a way that could help the wider community."

Getting involved with the project has been immensely beneficial as it has given me a much needed sense of purpose, brought me into a very positive environment and given me the opportunity to meet a wide range of very friendly people."

Supporting Communities

Wellbeing Walks

For over 16 years, we have run Wellbeing Walks across Bedfordshire, through which we deliver over 30 walk programmes - free and open to all. With the Covid restrictions lifted it has been a special year for our group walk programmes which have bounced back and gained many new walkers. Our groups have carried out almost 1300 walks throughout the county – with the final total of ‘people walks’ surpassing 2300, providing an average of 16 people on each of the walks. We have also trained another 12 walk leaders, which brings our active leader numbers to around 140. Through the many contacts of BRCC’s social providers and community agents we have been able to ‘spread the word’ to more people and more organisations, resulting in additional interest in the scheme.

Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network

Good Neighbour and Village Care Schemes play a vital role within their communities by facilitating access to occasional voluntary assistance, akin to the support one neighbour might offer another. This assistance serves as a crucial factor in allowing individuals to maintain their independence and continue residing in their own homes.

In May Debra Aitken our new Good Neighbour Support Officer joined the team, focussing on developing new groups in Bedford Borough villages and helping existing Borough groups go from strength to strength. We also worked with Bedford Borough Council to prepare the way for a second Support Officer post to start next financial year, which will aim to set up new Good Neighbour groups in Bedford town wards.

The ongoing coordination of the Bedfordshire network involves 37 groups, currently comprising just over 667 regularly active volunteers, with an additional 571 volunteers available for occasional assistance. Throughout Bedfordshire, these groups have collectively reported performing nearly 34000 tasks or acts of support this year. On average, they have assisted approximately 1275 residents each quarter, many of whom are recurring beneficiaries receiving help on a regular basis.

Green Infrastructure

We also provide a range of Community and Countryside initiatives, including wildlife conservation and volunteering. We host the Upper and Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership. Beds RCC also leads on a number of ‘Green Wheels’ (linking publicly accessible green spaces and routes within and around rural towns) in the Ivel Valley area. During this year we continued to work on the Potton Green Wheel which is due to launch in summer 2023; and commenced work on a Green Wheel Masterplan for Ampthill & Flitwick, in partnership with the Greensand Trust.

Beds RCC continues to deliver a variety of other activities that involve local people in designing, conserving and being active in their local green spaces, including our Ivel Valley Conservation Volunteers.

Housing and Planning

Beds RCC supports local communities to plan for their future through Neighbourhood and Green Infrastructure (GI) planning. During the year we supported 10 Neighbourhood Plan groups; we provided support to groups via phone and email and also through attending their Neighbourhood plan steering group meetings. We worked with four communities on Green Infrastructure Plans, including the identification of important sites to be designated and protected as Local Green Spaces.

In addition, we help rural parishes to meet their affordable housing needs by carrying out household surveys. This year we carried out three housing needs surveys, working in partnership with Parish Councils, Neighbourhood Plan steering groups, Local Authorities, Housing Associations and local landowners.

We continue to work as part of Eastern Community Homes, a community led housing hub for the eastern region – formed with our ACRE colleagues in the East of England. We continue to raise awareness of the benefits of community-led housing projects.

We facilitate the Community-led Planning and Rural Housing across Bedfordshire, offering advice and support in creating a Parish, Town, Neighbourhood or Green Infrastructure Plan, and we are part of the ACRE national network of Village Hall Advisors, we provide information, advice and support to Charitable Village Hall Committees.

Community Halls

Hall committees have gradually resumed normality post-Covid. The VHA service was able to support and guide this process, helping to relieve the residual anxiety felt by many committees. We supported eight halls in becoming Warm Spaces, including securing LA grants. During the year we were able to offer support to Hall Committees with 240 enquiries, covering a wide range of issues. We also worked to ensure that Halls were better equipped to face the energy crisis to keep them viable.



Dunstable Community Halls

In 2022 we took over Dunstable Community Halls from LuBYA (Luton & Bedfordshire Youth Association). The halls provide a useful base for our local projects, rentable space to local groups and residents and also increases awareness of Beds RCC in another area of Bedfordshire. There are plans in the future to become more involved in delivering projects for children and young people here.

In response to the cost of living crisis we made a decision to support the residents of Dunstable and the surrounding area to create a warm space during the winter months in our Dunstable Community Halls. We had an overwhelming response and on our busiest days we could see up to 40 people looking for social connections, a warm drink or light meal and some happy conversation.

As the weather improved it was clear the need was still there, so we renamed our warm space to The Wellbeing Café. Operating every week, we offer access to gardening activities, crafts, a warm meal with others, company and support. We continue to see high numbers engage with our Wellbeing Café – we hope it continues to support the local community.

Dunstable Cultural Consortium

Dunstable Cultural Consortium is now entering its final year of planned projects under the High Street Heritage Action Zone Funding and is currently looking to the future to continue to build upon the hard work so far.

Through celebrating local heritage and arts and culture our aim is to boost residents' pride in Dunstable, raise awareness of local history and provide opportunities for local people to engage with arts and cultural events.

Dunstable Cultural Consortium has been successfully delivering the 12 projects planned by local voluntary groups who make up the Consortium, including Dunstable Art Trails, Talking Plaques Trail, Memory Workshops and Themed Fun Days.

Time2Connect and Timebanking

Time2Connect has continued to connect residents in Houghton Regis with each other and other community groups; as well as providing guidance and information about local services and activities. In Timebanking people give up some of their time to help someone in exchange for help for themselves. This initiative gives a purpose and value to individuals as well as contributing to neighbourhoods and building community.



Beds RCC NEWS

Beds RCC Launches Green Wellbeing Directory to Help People Across Bedfordshire Get Out in Nature

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity has put together a Green Wellbeing Directory on their 'Your Wellbeing Bedfordshire' website. This directory features opportunities for people to get out in nature, and lists over 60 activities or places to visit across Bedfordshire already – which will continue to grow.

These activities and places give people the chance to get some exercise, meet new people, make a difference and/or learn new skills- all while being in nature. Activities range from volunteering at local community gardens or conservation groups to taking part in regular Wellbeing Walks.

A spokesperson for Beds RCC said: "Not only is nature free and available to all, but helps us to feel good too. People can also get a great deal out of joining more social activities outdoors, such as volunteering or walking groups. Our Green Wellbeing Directory makes it easy for people across Bedfordshire to find out about what's happening around them."

'MEET: Men, Exercise, Engage, Talk' project launches in Bedford

MEET (Men, Exercise, Engage, Talk) gives men the opportunity to exercise together, engage with creative activities, and talk to each other in a relaxed, open space. The project idea began when a member of the local community contacted Beds RCC with concerns about a gap in the market for a group aimed at 18-30 year olds. His own experience of mental health and his passion to make a difference to others has been instrumental in setting up the group.

MEET will be taking place on Sunday afternoons from 12pm – 4pm at Golden Gardens, Goldington, The Copse, Bedford (MK41 0EU). The session will feature different activities, such as gardening and building projects, as well as a walk to Priory Country Park and exercise. Alex Goulding, Beds RCC staff member and certified Personal Trainer will be on hand at times to help people with some fitness training.

This project has been funded by a grant from Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation (BLCF). Beds RCC are delighted to have received support from BLCF, as it allows us to continue helping those living in Bedfordshire and particularly reach out to men aged 18-30 in this setting.

Community Transport

New Head of Community Transport

Bill Simmons became the new Head of Community Transport alongside his role as Digital Lead in August 2022.

Door to Door and Greensand Country

Beds RCC operates two personalised transport services, commonly known as 'dial-a-ride,' to cater to individuals facing substantial challenges in utilising conventional public transportation. These services are 'Door to Door,' which serves the entirety of Bedford Borough, and 'Greensand Country' community transport, focusing on northern Central Bedfordshire.

Together, they extend their coverage across 75% of Bedfordshire, encompassing areas from Dean & Shelton in the north to Harlington in the south. Both services are closely intertwined, often utilising the same vehicles and drivers to provide efficient transportation solutions for the community.

Community Transport have gained extra contract work and continue to look for additional work across Bedfordshire.

Bedford Mobility Hub

The Mobility Hub remained closed during the whole of 22/23.



Community Transport

Community Rail Partnerships (CRPs)

Beds RCC oversees the operations Beds & Herts CRP (Bedford - St Albans line) and Marston Vale CRP (Bedford - Bletchley line) which both help to bridge the gap between the railway industry and local communities. 2022-23 presented a mixture of challenges and opportunities for both CRPs, primarily due to regular rail strikes and the suspension of train services on the Marston Vale line since December 2022. This was caused by the closure of a vital train maintenance company. However, despite this setback, our dedicated team have actively kept local community informed and updated on the progress and plans for the resumption of services.

Both CRPs share Bedford Midland station and have worked together on special events and activities. Following the suspension of the train service on the MV line meaning they were unable to arrange the popular 'Santa Special', alternative events were arranged including a successful three day Festive Music event at Bedford raising over £1,000 for Bedford Food Bank. Both CRPs are looking forward to continue working together, along with recently signed-up Carers in Bedfordshire as Station Friends at Bedford Midland.

BHCRP have been promoting active travel with a new cycle leaflet 'Discover Days out by Bike on a Train', linking the line to the National Cycle Network. They signed up Station Friends at Bedford Midland, Flitwick and Harlington, and further strengthened their relationship with groups at St Albans City with bulb planting and Christmas decorations by The Daylight Club; and the St Albans South Signal Box Museum with school visits and a photo exhibition.

Both CRPs have been further developing the 'Symbol Spot' (Eye-Spy on a train) project on their respective lines following lockdown, with further exciting updates to come, and a resumption of train services on the MV line.

MVCRP arranged a special late evening Saturday service and all-day Sunday service for Bedford River Festival in July, during which over 1500 passengers travelled. The CRP was reaccredited by the Department for Transport (DfT) in September. 'Accreditation is formal recognition by the DfT that a Community Rail Partnership (CRP) operates to a high standard and that its objectives and activities are supported by Government'. (DfT)

MVCRP secured funding from London Northwestern Railway to tackle ongoing anti-social behaviour at Lidlington Station. 4YP UK were commissioned to run weekly workshops with young people starting in November with volunteers from Lidlington Church. An artist was commissioned to co-produce four pieces of artwork with the young people for Lidlington Station. 24 different young people attended during the year.

Marston Vale CRP operates from and are a partner with the award-winning Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre, a Grade II Listed building from 1846, to a design approved by the Duke of Bedford. This building was restored between 2007 and 2013. Following Covid it is now fully open to the public with a Heritage Centre, tea room and office space.

Finance and Business Services

Finance and HR Management

During this year the finance team have continued to develop and establish rigorous financial controls. The team ensured that the focus remained on maintaining the positive changes from the previous year and continued to improve finance procedures and HR Admin processes.

IT and Website

The Social Prescribing Team in conjunction with the Integrated Care Boards (ICB) and Primary care ensured that Community Wellbeing Champions were able to securely access patient records via the clinical software SystemOne. This required a significant amount of partnership work and technical support for each team member while software was installed and configured.

New websites were designed for The Barn and Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room to make it easier for web users to find these services online. A new website was also designed for Dunstable Community Halls.

Marketing

Throughout the year the Marketing team continues to be very busy. Our Marketing and Communications Officer Hannah Penwright has developed her expertise and skills in a number of areas producing engaging printed and online material for both new and continued projects. This continues to have a huge positive impact on Beds RCC's brand and wider promotional activities as the team spread positive news stories about Beds RCC.

Greensand Country Landscape Partnership

The Greensand Country Landscape Partnership programme successfully completed in March 2023 and transferred over to The Greensand Trust for the Forward Plan.



BRCC Trading Services Ltd

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity operates a wholly-owned subsidiary company entitled BRCC Services Ltd, the purpose of which is to raise funds to support the charity. The directors of the company are:

P Grayson
I Kelly (resigned September 2022)
I Riches
T Harcus
T Cowan (Secretary)

The main trading activities of BRCC Trading Services Ltd are currently:

Ridgmont Station Tea Room
Warden Abbey Community Vineyard

The Barn Cardington sadly closed in February 2023 due to economic pressures.



Review of Activities

The Barn - Cardington

The Barn started off 2022 on a positive note, hoping that with new improvements the business would be able to be sustained in a difficult economic environment. Sadly, by quarter two it became apparent that the cost of living crisis was affecting everything and in particular The Barn, and the decision was taken to close The Barn in early 2023.

Improvements

The outside seating area was refurbished with a fence added to mark the seating area, featuring local flowers and umbrellas for shade. The playground area was also completed to allow children to use whilst they visited. To celebrate the local producers in Bedfordshire and the surrounding areas, The Barn collaborated with small local businesses to host a range of events such as local product tastings, BBQs and pop-up stalls.

Closing Down

This year was extremely challenging and despite the best efforts of the Finance Director and Chief Executive along with the staff members at The Barn, the decision was taken to close The Barn. The cost of living crisis, extortionate energy rates and staffing issues meant the business had become unwieldy, resource consuming and a drain on the Trading Company. The Barn ceased trading on 28th February 2023. Huge thanks must go to the staff team that worked tirelessly above and beyond their paid duties to try and save the business and then the work involved in winding down and closing The Barn.



Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room

Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room was open for the whole of 2022-23, delivering both heritage and volunteering opportunities whilst continuing to serve breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea. There were some themed events such as “Festive Afternoon Tea” and a successful “Beauty and the Beast” event along with some of the Community Rail Partnership events. Volunteers from the Friends of Ridgmont Station who help run the Heritage Centre contributed 1,700 hours of volunteering. The ceasing of the running of the trains from December 2022 had an impact on the Centre, but there was a Christmas pop-up shop to encourage new visitors. Due to the focus on The Barn, the Tea Room ran as business as usual but there are plans to develop the whole Centre and Tea Room for 2023/24 and hopefully the re-introduction of the trains will support that.

Office and Meeting Rooms to Let

Following changes to the first floor of the Heritage Centre, two offices became available to let for those seeking a unique workspace. These offices are also available to hire on a one-off basis for meetings, with refreshments provided from the Tea Room.

Warden Abbey Community Vineyard

The community vineyard continued to experience popular demand for tours and events over the summer after having to close previously during the pandemic. The events season began in May with two planting days which brought together donors, volunteers and local groups who planted and name-tagged new vines. Throughout the spring and summer, the vineyard hosted tours and events including flying day picnics, paella evenings and the highly-anticipated September open day.

Another year of damage from spring frost meant a bumper crop was never likely. However, a memorably hot and dry summer and meticulous work by the vineyard team helped the vineyard recover more than expected. The grapes were beautiful, and volunteers picked 2.7 tonnes of grapes which should produce around 2000 bottles of still and sparkling wines. As well as students from St John’s Special School, this year the vineyard also worked with adults with learning disabilities from Biggleswade Adult Centre, who worked with the fantastic volunteer mentors. The vineyard also won a commendation medal for their Bacchus 2019 at the International Wine Challenge 2022.

December 2022 saw the retirement of our much-loved vineyard manager Jane Markham who was part of Warden Abbey Vineyard for over 10 years. Jane worked tirelessly to look after the vineyard and volunteers and we want to say a huge thank you to her for all her hard work.



Financial Review

Reserves Policy

The trustees have identified the need for the Charity to hold unrestricted reserves for three principal reasons:

- a) To remain resilient and manage risk in an increasingly uncertain and volatile operating environment
- b) To accommodate cash flow pressures at a time when a number of BRCC's income streams involve payment in arrears
- c) To allow for significant contingency, particularly the costs incurred in the event of closing down the Charity

Its unrestricted reserves will therefore contain two elements:

1. Resilience funds: BRCC will hold between 1 and 3 months' total budgeted operating costs in order to provide sufficient cash flow for the organisation while enabling it to address future opportunities, threats and risks as part of its long-term financial planning, as well as sensitively managing the cessation of services to beneficiaries where required.
2. Designated funds: the trustees have designated a Contingency Fund (to cover the costs of winding up the organisation); a Building & Vehicles Maintenance Reserve (to cover extraordinary repairs or maintenance costs); and a Fixed Assets Reserve (reflecting the current value of its Fixed Assets). These funds will not be used day to day for the purposes outlined in 1 and 2. The trustees review the levels of these designated funds annually.

The Charity will not hold more reserves than it needs to deliver the aims of this policy, in order to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of its current beneficiaries as effectively as possible.

The level of reserves held will be monitored monthly by the Management Team and quarterly by the Board of Directors. The Board will review this reserves policy annually.

Financial Review

During the year, the charity and its trading subsidiary BRCC Services Ltd raised income of £3,548,222 (2021/22 £2,888,801) to enable it to deliver a range of activities under its charitable objects. This income came principally from local and central government, Lottery distributing bodies and other funders through a range of service level agreements, grants and contracts, as well as including the value of Dunstable Community Halls on the transfer of assets from Luton and Bedfordshire Youth Association. A proportion of income also came directly from clients and beneficiaries (through fees and charges), and some from retail activities and donations.

Total expenditure during the year amounted to £2,808,071 (2022 £2,661,143), with the result that the overall net movement in funds for the year is reported as a surplus of £740,151 (2022 £227,658). However, the surplus includes the cash and property transferred from Luton and Bedfordshire Youth Association at £715,736, leaving an operating activities of £24,415 for the year.

Transfers have been made to increase the balance in the Fixed Asset Reserve to £1,150,708 (2022 £503,424) to match the total net book value of the fixed assets as at 31 March 2023. The other designated reserves (Contingency and Buildings & Vehicle Maintenance reserves) have been maintained at the same level.

Highlights of the Year

70th Anniversary

2023 marks 70 years of Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, which began in 1953. Beds RCC have a wide range of projects and services that benefit local communities across Bedfordshire, and the fact that these have shaped the county for 70 years now is a huge achievement.

Chief Executive Tracy Cowan said:

"I am incredibly proud of our wonderful staff and volunteer teams – both past and present – for all their hard work over the past 70 years. The fact that we can celebrate the year as the SME Awards 'Community Business of the Year' makes the achievement even greater and I'm looking forward to celebrating the year!"

There are many exciting plans for the year, including a Staff Celebration and much more.

Beds RCC Summer Celebration

Staff, Volunteers, Trustees and Patrons came together in July for a Summer Celebration and the Star Awards ceremony, which was previously postponed due to Covid-19. The different Beds RCC's teams came together at Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre to celebrate the hard work they have carried out over the past year, and an array of team members were recognised as both highly commended and winners of the 2022 Star Awards.

Staff Health and Wellbeing

Following the Staff Health and Wellbeing Survey in 2021, a similar survey was created in 2022 to find out how the changes made by the Senior Management Team had been met. The overall results were more positive than the previous year, which demonstrates that the changes made by SMT have been received well. The staff wellbeing group continues to meet and have played a role in creating the 2022 survey, as well as sharing engaging posts and running wellbeing events for Self-Care week (November 2022). Following on from the success of Self-Care week, regular wellbeing events are planned for staff to attend.

Warden Abbey Vineyard Publicity

At the beginning of 2023 our community vineyard Warden Abbey Vineyard was featured in an article by the Vineyard Magazine which shares about the past, present, and future of the vineyard and how it impacts the local community. In July, Warden Abbey Vineyard were invited on BBC Three Counties Radio to talk about the work they do and their wine as part of English Wine Week. Monica, a volunteer from the vineyard, spoke about the history of the vineyard, the wine they make and how people can get involved.

Social Media Engagement

Facebook (@bedsrcc)

1,519 followers

1,100 likes



Instagram (@bedsrcc)

518 followers



Twitter (@bedsrcc)

1,331 followers



Business/Project Social Media Engagement

A wide range of our projects and services including Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre, Warden Abbey Vineyard, Your Wellbeing Bedfordshire, Dunstable Community Halls, Community Rail Partnerships and Timebanking have seen positive Social Media growth, using the pages to connect with the community and share good news stories.

Plans for the Future

Future Developments:

1. The launch of the Strategic Plan 2024
2. Refurbishment and launch of the Dunstable Community Halls
3. Expand our Community Transport Service through increasing the range of services and projects
4. Continue to develop our presence in the South of the County and Luton
5. Expand our Rural Housing offer to provide the full Rural Housing Enabler service
6. Continue to grow our Community and Wellbeing Service securing funding from LA's/ CCG and the Primary Care Networks and further expand into Green Social Prescribing, Digital Isolation and Children and Young People areas
7. Continue to develop the Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network
8. To acquire full Museum accreditation for Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and develop the offer
9. Continue to grow our Culture and Heritage offer
10. Continue to develop collaborative relationships with other local organisations and within the ACRE Network
11. Continue to look for opportunities and diversify income streams where possible





***Connecting and caring for our
communities across Bedfordshire***

Get In Touch!

The Old School,
Cardington, Bedford
MK44 3SX

01234 838771

info@bedsrcc.org.uk

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Twitter: @bedsrcc

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Instagram: @bedsrcc

www.bedsrcc.org.uk