



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity

Annual Report 2023-2024





Connecting and caring for our
communities across Bedfordshire

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Message from our Chief Executive



Hello everyone,

Welcome to our Annual Report for 2023/2024.

It is with great pride that I reflect on an incredible year for Beds RCC and our communities. Over the past 12 months, we have seen our projects grow and flourish, strengthened by the dedication and energy of our volunteers, staff, and partners. From the launch of new initiatives like 'Rails to Roots' and BigglesBikes, to national recognition in *'delicious'* magazine and the honour of welcoming members of the Royal Family to our events, this year has truly been one of transformative impact and celebration.

At the heart of everything we do is a commitment to building resilient, vibrant, and supportive communities across rural Bedfordshire. This year, we have extended our reach, deepened our partnerships, and celebrated the power of community through a variety of innovative projects. Whether it was the development of new green spaces, such as Lily's Garden at Dunstable Community Halls, or providing accessible activities for families with our 'Walk on the Wild Side' programme, we have continued to prioritise wellbeing and sustainability in all our efforts.

A very proud moment was seeing our incredible volunteers being recognised for their contribution to community life. The King's Award for Voluntary Service for Houghton Regis Helpers and the high commendations for our gardening groups reflect the enormous value that our volunteers bring. They are the lifeblood of Beds RCC, turning our vision into reality and helping us to touch the lives of those across the region.

This year was also marked by new beginnings. The launch of our Strategic Plan and the celebration of our 70th anniversary provided an opportunity to look back on seven decades of supporting Bedfordshire's rural communities, while also setting our sights on the future. As we continue to grow and evolve, our focus will remain on creating welcoming, inclusive spaces where people can thrive, connect and feel supported.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the passion and hard work of our staff, trustees, volunteers and partners. I am incredibly grateful to each and every one of you for your continued support and belief in our mission. Together, we have achieved so much this year, and I am excited to see what the coming year will bring as we continue to innovate, inspire and make a difference.

Thank you for being a part of this journey.

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracy Cowan". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Tracy Cowan
Beds RCC Chief Executive Officer

Message from our Chair

On 29 February 2024, I was delighted to thank, in person, all the people who contributed to the launch of our Strategic Plan.

We reflected on how we have assisted and empowered all the clients and beneficiaries of our projects. Listening to the contributions from presenters, I realised that our professional behaviours and successful outcomes continue to enable people to feel safe, supported and actively engaged in their communities.

The enthusiasm shown by our staff, managers and volunteers demonstrates impressive motivation towards improving lives, encouraging volunteering and increasing the sense of belonging.

Trustees have carried out their governance role, including supporting wellbeing opportunities for staff. Staff wellbeing enables focused energy in all aspects of our award-winning delivery of projects and services. Through the year, I have heard examples of positive kindness from staff, managers, volunteers, trustees, patrons and partners.

Thank you for the creativity, innovation and careful planning throughout 2023-2024 to ensure this is a strong, progressive and enormously valuable charity.



A handwritten signature of Paula Grayson in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Paula Grayson
Beds RCC Chair

About Us



Staff and partner organisations at the launch of the Strategic Plan

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).

Our objects

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 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:

1. A **coordinator** of local community activity to enable communities to do more for themselves and reduce reliance on the state.
2. An **intermediary** between public (and private) service providers and the people in local communities they need to reach.
3. A **manager of partnerships** across public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve common objectives (e.g. conservation, rural economic development).
4. 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 31 March 2024 and Director of BRCC Trading Services Board)

Mrs June Barnes

Mr Christopher Barker

Mr Barry George

Mr Tim Hill

Mrs Ann Lovesey

Mr Brian Prickett

(Resigned 30 November 2023)

Mr Ian Riches

(Also a Director of BRCC Trading Services Board)

Mrs Sukhi Kooner

Mr Craig Smith

Mr Mark Liddiard

(Appointed 30 November 2023)

Mr Ashok Khandelwal

(Appointed 27 February 2024)

Mr Joel Carre

(Appointed 28 February 2024)

Mr Tim Harcus

(A Director of BRCC Trading Services Board only - Resigned 27 March 2024)

Mr Mark Robins

(Appointed as a Director of BRCC Trading Services Board only on the 27 February 2024 – Resigned on the 28 March 2024)

Officers

Company Secretary

Mrs Tracy Cowan

Chief Executive

Mrs Tracy Cowan

Senior Management Team

Mr Cliff Andrews

Ms Janice Janes

Mrs Kate Ellis

Mr Bill Simmons

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

What We Do

As a rural charity, we work to support our communities with a wide and varied approach across multiple areas: *Supporting Communities, Health and Wellbeing, Supporting Culture and Heritage, Green Infrastructure and Sustainability, Community Transport and Corporate and Community Business.*

Supporting Communities



This area of our work focuses on the health and wellbeing of people and the environment they live in. Under *Supporting Communities* we have:

- Village and Community Agents
- Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network
- Housing and Planning
- Village and Community Halls
- Time2Connect and Timebanking
- Community Connectors (new to 2024)

Health and Wellbeing



Our team of Community Wellbeing Champions helps people take control of their health and wellbeing. This area includes:

- Social Prescribing
- Wellbeing Walks
- You Can Do IT!
- Youth 2 Adults
- Jubilation Hub

Supporting Culture and Heritage



We support the culture and heritage of Bedfordshire, ensuring the preservation of our rich history and traditions, via the following areas:

- Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre
- Dunstable Cultural Consortium

Green Infrastructure and Sustainability



Green Infrastructure and Sustainability supports the mental well-being and ecology of Bedfordshire in the following areas:

- Green Infrastructure
- Green Social Prescribing
- Dunstable Community Halls
- Ecology and Conservation Volunteering

Community Transport



Community Transport assists with the needs of people across Bedfordshire. Under *Community Transport*, we have:

- Door to Door Bus Service and Greensand Country Dial-a-rides
- Community Rail Partnerships

Corporate and Community Business



Includes our finance team, marketing and IT and the Greensand Country Project team, as well as our two not-for-profit businesses:

- Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room
- Warden Abbey Vineyard

Staff Organisation Chart

Tracy Cowan
Chief Executive

Jo Barrow
Executive Assistant

Cliff Andrews
Deputy CEO & Head of Supporting Communities

Community Planning and
Rural Housing

Village Halls

Community Agents

Good Neighbours

Ecology

Wellbeing Walks

Conservation
Volunteering

Green Infrastructure

Dunstable Community
Halls

Green Wheels

Dunstable Cultural
Consortium

Timebanking

Time2Connect

Janice Janes
Director of Finance &
Business Services

Finance

Business Services
(Trading)

Warden Abbey Vineyard

Ridgmont Station
Heritage Centre and Tea
Room

Tracy Cowan
Chief Executive

Jo Barrow
Executive Assistant

Kate Ellis
Head of Community and Wellbeing

Community Referral
Bedford Borough

Green Social Prescribing

Community Referral
Central Bedfordshire

Community Gardens

ELFT Mental Health
Social Prescribing

Community Connectors

Social Prescribing
Primary Care Networks

You Can Do IT!

Data Protection

Data & Marketing

Bill Simmons
Head of Community
Transport

Door2Door Bus Service

Greensand Country Bus
Service

Marston Vale Community
Rail Partnership

Beds & Herts Community
Rail Partnership

Overview of the Year

2023

April

A Blooming Good Start

The year began with a flourish as Beds RCC launched the 'Rails to Roots' gardening group at the Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room. This initiative has not only transformed the courtyard garden into a vibrant community space, but has also extended our green wellbeing projects to a new area of Bedfordshire. The group's efforts have created a peaceful retreat that visitors and locals alike have come to cherish, adding a new dimension to our services in the region.



2023

May

Coronation Celebrations and Community Engagement

In May, we joined in the national celebration of His Majesty, The King's Coronation by participating in 'The Big Help Out'. Warden Abbey Vineyard opened its doors for two taster days, inviting the community to experience volunteering in a unique and meaningful way. These events highlighted the spirit of service that is at the heart of Beds RCC's mission, connecting people to nature and to each other through shared work and purpose.



2023

June

Honouring Our Volunteers

Volunteer recognition took centre stage in June as we celebrated Volunteers Week. Our dedicated volunteers from Ridgmont, Bedford St Johns, Lidlington Stations, Warden Abbey Vineyard and Dunstable Community Halls' Garden Group were among the guests at the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada's garden party. This event was a heartfelt acknowledgment of the countless hours our volunteers contribute, making our communities stronger and more resilient.



2023

July

National Spotlight on Local Treasures

In July, Warden Abbey Vineyard gained national attention with a feature in the renowned food magazine *'delicious'*. The article highlighted the unique volunteer-driven approach of the vineyard, underscoring how community involvement enhances the quality of our wine and strengthens local ties. This recognition was a proud moment, showcasing how Beds RCC's projects not only serve local needs but also stand out on a national stage.

2023

August

Pedalling Forward and Family Fun

August marked the successful launch of 'BigglesBikes' in Biggleswade, a community bike scheme that saw nearly 50 new users in its first month. This initiative encourages healthy, sustainable transport and adds to the vibrant community life in the area. Additionally, our 'Walk on the Wild Side' family walks provided free, nature-based activities during the summer holidays, helping families connect with the outdoors in meaningful ways.



2023

September

New Beginnings and Well-Deserved Recognitions

September was a month of milestones. The Potton Green Wheel walking route was unveiled, offering residents and visitors a new way to explore the natural beauty of the area. The Bedfordshire Mental Health Alliance held its first meeting, a collaborative effort between Beds RCC, Mind BLMK, and Carers in Bedfordshire, reflecting our commitment to mental health support. The launch of Dunstable Community Halls and 'Lily's Garden' after extensive renovations provided a renewed space for community activities. Our efforts were further validated as Warden Abbey Vineyard won the 'Made in Bedfordshire' category at the CPRE Bedfordshire Living Countryside Awards, with Lily's Garden earning a Highly Commended recognition at the Dunstable in Bloom awards.



2023

October

Royal Encounters and Local Innovations

October was a month of royal connections and local creativity. Beds RCC staff had the honour of meeting Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal at the Rural Housing Conference, a prestigious event hosted by the English Rural Housing Association. The launch of Ridgmont Heritage's new 'Rail Ale' at our Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre brought a fusion of local art and craft beer to the community, whilst the Jubilation Community Hub opened its doors, providing a warm, welcoming space for Bedford residents.



Credit: Matt Pereira Photography

2023

November

Celebrating Service and Innovation

In November, Houghton Regis Helpers received the King's Award for Voluntary Service 2023, a testament to their unwavering dedication to providing Good Neighbour help. Additionally, our M.E.E.T. (Men, Exercise, Engage, Talk) programme was shortlisted for the Self-Care Forum's Innovation Awards, recognising its impact on men's health and well-being.



2023

December

Milestones and Festive Cheer

The year closed on a festive note with Meppershall GNOMES celebrating their 10th anniversary with an Afternoon Tea. Meanwhile, the Jubilation Hub brought the community together with natural craft sessions, teaching members how to create handmade festive decorations and gifts, fostering a spirit of creativity and togetherness during the holiday season.



2024

January

Winter Wellbeing and New Opportunities

As winter set in, Beds RCC extended its Green Social Prescribing offer with the Ivel Valley Winter Wellbeing Group. This programme provided a sanctuary for individuals to engage in gardening and relaxation at Dunton Community Garden, ensuring that the benefits of green spaces are year-round.

2024

February

Strategic Vision and Legacy

February was a time for reflection and future planning as BRCC held its Strategic Plan Launch. This event brought together staff, trustees, patrons and partners to celebrate our achievements and outline our vision for the future. We also premiered our 70th Anniversary video, a timely reminder of our enduring commitment to the communities we serve.



2024

March

Going Green and Embracing the Future

The reporting year culminated in March with Village Halls Week, where we shared exciting updates on our efforts to help village halls and community buildings across Bedfordshire 'Go Green'. This initiative aligns with our commitment to sustainability and community resilience, setting the stage for a greener, more connected future.

This year has been one of growth, celebration and impactful change for Beds RCC. From new projects and royal recognitions to national spotlights and community milestones, we have continued to fulfil our mission of supporting and enriching rural and urban communities across Bedfordshire. As we look ahead, we remain committed to building on this year's successes and creating even more opportunities for connection, wellbeing, community and collaboration.

The team of staff, volunteers, trustees and patrons support our organisation selflessly with passion and enthusiasm - and for that they need a special thank you in our report.

Supporting Communities



Leaders wellbeing walk in Flitwick



Biggleswade Good Neighbours filming for 70th anniversary



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.

This year, we supported 31 groups within the Bedfordshire network. We had 465 volunteers who carried out more than 15,788 tasks. We ran training sessions covering safeguarding and DBS checks.

In August, Amanda Higham joined the team as our second Good Neighbour Support Officer, funded by Bedford Borough Council for one year to assess the need for Good Neighbour groups in Bedford town wards and to support residents to set these up.

Considerable need was confirmed - with many residents able to be linked to one-to-one support from Beds RCC agents and social prescribers – but the challenging economic climate saw few town residents with sufficient time, skills and confidence able to come forward as volunteers to set up and run new groups. However, residents are working hard on setting up a group in Brickhill - due to launch next financial year.

In the rural parts of the Borough, new groups launched in Stevington (23 June) and Milton Ernest (23 March), with Pavenham due to launch in April of next financial year. In Central Beds, a new group launched in Blunham in May 2023.

On 14 November 2023, the birthday of HRH King Charles III, it was announced that the volunteers of Houghton Regis Helpers were awarded *The King's Award for Voluntary Service (KAVS) 2023*. Equivalent to an MBE for Volunteer Groups, the KAVS is the highest Award given to local voluntary groups in the UK.

In February, Biggleswade Good Neighbours – winners of the Queen's QAVS award in 2022 - were featured in Beds RCC's 70th Anniversary video, filmed delivering

shopping and giving lifts. They acted as the onscreen face for all the Good Neighbour groups in the Bedfordshire network who are looking after our more vulnerable residents every day.

The ongoing coordination of the Bedfordshire network involved 40 groups in 2023/24, comprising of 688 regularly active volunteers, with an additional 520 volunteers available for occasional assistance. Throughout Bedfordshire, these groups have collectively reported performing nearly 29,500 tasks or acts of support this year. On average, they have assisted approximately 1,243 residents each quarter, many of whom are recurring beneficiaries receiving help on a regular basis, while 844 residents this year contacted a Good Neighbour scheme for the very first time.



Village and Community Agents

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

During this year, we developed a Town Agent pilot post for Bedford Borough, who was based in Bedford and Kempston. Furthermore, we have three Community Agents who work with specific communities in Central Bedfordshire, thanks to local funding arrangements. Our agents in Central Bedfordshire cover Biggleswade, Potton and Leighton Linlade.

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



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 ten 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 three 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 two housing needs surveys and commenced work on a number of others, working in partnership with parish councils, Neighbourhood Plan steering groups, local authorities, housing associations and local landowners.

We secured funding from Defra, via ACRE, to expand our Rural Housing service and are planning to appoint a new Rural Housing Enabler and launch the Bedfordshire Rural Housing Partnership in 2024/25.

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. We are part of the ACRE national network of Village Hall Advisors and provided information, advice and support to 93 charitable village hall committees.



Village Halls and Community Buildings

Hall committees have gradually resumed normality post-Covid lockdowns. The VHA service was able to support and guide this process, helping to relieve the residual anxiety felt by many committees.

The Beds RCC Village Hall's Advisory Service was able to support village hall and community building management committees, including some church halls with information and advice throughout the year. Relevant ACRE information sheets and various Charity Commission publications were sent to committees as required. These cover a variety of issues which halls face in their day-to-day management. Advice was given by phone and email, but also backed up by nine visits to halls. The Service responded to 232 enquiries or contact from 93 halls. Issues covered governance, trustee roles, fire risk assessments, funding, licensing, VAT and maintenance.

In addition, halls were invited to participate in Village Halls Week, based on the theme of '*How halls could be: Becoming greener*'. The service also worked with Central Bedfordshire Council to update the village hall survey covering hall condition and needs. This evidence base helps to inform S106 funding, which can be available to help halls.

As a result of the above activities: some halls were able to change their governance structure to CIO; funding was obtained for improvements at Great Denham and Stevington Community Halls (developing a church room into a community hall, supporting them to secure a grant of £19,000 towards the adaptations needed); some governance issues were resolved; and generally halls were better equipped to manage issues as they arose.



Time2Connect and Timebanking

Time2Connect has continued to connect residents in Houghton Regis with each other, as well as provide guidance and information about local services and activities. Timebanking supports anyone who would like to share or exchange their time and skills with others and receive help in return. Timebanking is a great way to get involved in your community or to help others. This initiative gives a purpose and value to individuals, as well as contributing to neighbourhoods and building community. This year, our timebanks volunteers across Bedfordshire exchanged over 900 hours of support in their communities.

Health and Wellbeing



Participants at the Dunstable Community Hall Wellbeing Cafe



Social prescribing drop-in at Woodside



Social Prescribing

Our Community Referral (Social Prescribing) service supports adults across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire to enable adults to make life changes that support their health and wellbeing. The service continues to offer Self-Referral, VCSE referral and GP referral with the following Primary Care networks: Unity, Caritas, Bedford North, Sandhills, Ivel Valley South and Hilton.

We are also working in partnership with colleagues at East London Foundation Trust, as part of the transformation of secondary mental health services. We have embedded Community Wellbeing Champions into community mental health teams, enabling adults with a serious mental illness to access this role and community-based support.

To respond to the needs of our service users, we have developed our Green Social Prescribing offer (see page 19). Offering a nature-based activity as part of a holistic response to people's needs is delivering good outcomes for our people and identifying assets across our communities.

Mental health and loneliness remain the primary reasons for referral into the service. 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. The Wellbeing Space at Dunstable Community Halls has been a great success and offers approximately 30 people a week a hot drink and light lunch. In response to 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 4,000 referrals, creating over 20,000 contacts, 7,000 onward referrals with our beneficiaries reporting the greatest improvement in "Feeling Positive" and "Being Connected to Work/Volunteering" or other activities.



Wellbeing Walks

Beds RCC has now been running Wellbeing Walks in the Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough areas for over 17 years. We currently deliver - through our trained volunteer walk leaders - 30 different walk programmes. Some of our more popular walks also divide further into slow, medium and fast groups, meaning that walkers can decide, on the day, which walk will suit them best.

Over the last year, we have recorded 1,250 group walks, with the final total of 'people walks' exceeding 15,600. This provides an average figure of 17 people on each walk, though two of our groups have been averaging over 30 walkers each week.

Notably, and in addition to the many physical and mental benefits of walking, many of our walkers report that they take part for social reasons, looking forward to their weekly activity and enjoying the camaraderie of the groups.

Youth 2 Adults

As part of the Mental Health Collaboration Fund, we partnered with Music 24 and Dunstable Cultural Consortium to deliver Youth 2 Adults (Y2A). This was a new opportunity for Beds RCC; offering an early intervention to young people meets our aims set in our strategy. The group was funded to support young people in Dunstable and the surrounding area who were struggling with their mental health and may Not be in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and may have a diagnosis of ASD or ADHD.

This group met twice a week at Dunstable Community Halls, where they could engage in art sessions, creative music sessions and access support services to build connections and improve their confidence. The young people who engaged with our sessions reported they were able to build friendships and discover new opportunities, beyond the group.

Jubilation Hub

In partnership with our funder BIG LOCAL, we have successfully launched the Jubilation Community Drop-in to support residents to access support services, become physically active, enjoy a hot drink, soup or roll and make connections in their community.

The group runs every Monday with the support from our Community Hub Coordinator and Assistant. In collaboration with residents who attend the session, our hub team has co-designed a variety of groups and sessions to engage everyone.

A highlight from our Christmas programme was our free festive door wreath session and a bookable five-week wood carving course. Both sessions were delivered by our skilled team as part of our Green Social Prescribing offer.



You Can Do IT!

Digital connection sees us working with people in Bedfordshire to help them become more digitally included, to teach and equip them to access online services that improve their health and wellbeing helping, reduce loneliness and inspire confidence.

The 'You Can Do IT!' project, which supports people to learn how to use digital technology, has gone from development phase last year to delivering sessions across Bedford and Central Bedfordshire. 12 active volunteers continue to support us as Digital Health Champions to provide that help within our established groups. We expanded this year and are looking for additional funding to continue the programme well in to 2024. The project has welcomed 150 learners across all groups and delivered 1,023 sessions of individual tuition.

In addition to groups in Biggleswade, Putnoe, Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Bromham, we've added groups in Sandy and Flitwick.

A partnership with Be Active, who is funded by Central Bedfordshire Council, has enabled the Flitwick group to be funded within Flitwick Library. National Health Service Charity's Together (NHSCT) funding ended on 31 March 2024, with funding from Be Active for the Central Bedfordshire groups agreed until 31 August 2024. Further funding is being sought for continuation - and potentially expansion - of You Can Do IT!

Green Infrastructure and sustainability



Biggleswade bicycle seat with map of bike hire locations



Tending to the plants at Dunstable Community Hall gardens



Green Infrastructure

We also provide a range of community and countryside initiatives, including wildlife conservation and volunteering. This year, we have been developing several new Green Infrastructure plans for villages, including facilitated workshops, online surveys and drop-in engagement sessions. 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. We commenced work on masterplanning for the Ampthill & Flitwick Green Wheel and launched the Pottton Green Wheel.

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. For over 17 years, we have run Wellbeing Walks across Bedfordshire, through which we deliver over 40 walk programmes.

Green Social Prescribing



Our Green Social Prescribing programme developed over the year. We continued to support green groups, including offering Mental Health Awareness training through MIND to those who run nature-based activities.

A focus for the year was the development of Green Social Prescribing offers through our own assets – including new wellbeing groups through the Warden Abbey Vineyard and the Ivel Valley Conservation Volunteers, the creation of new community gardens at Dunstable Community Halls and Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre, and setting up a new cycle scheme alongside the Biggleswade Green Wheel.

We continued to support and partner with a range of groups to create offers, including running a new Green Wellbeing group at Dunton Community Garden, and nature connection sessions at The Lighthouse in Leighton Buzzard. Other green social prescribing offers this year included fishing, natural mindfulness walks, wood carving and seasonal nature-based crafts.



Ecology and Conservation Volunteering

Our in-house ecologist supported landowners and local authorities in undertaking a number of habitat and species surveys to inform planning applications and land management decisions. Our hosting of the Upper and Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership continued our involvement in caring for the wildlife of our rivers. Our Ivel Valley Conservation Volunteers group undertook over 40 tasks, including habitat creation and management, and access enhancements to countryside sites.



Dunstable Community Halls

The Dunstable Community Halls (DCH) continue to provide hireable space to local residents of Dunstable and surrounding villages. Activities such as pilates, children's dance, karate, adult education, health and wellbeing, and church meetings continue to grow on a regular basis.

The comfort of our users has greatly increased with the provision of air conditioning, insulation and double glazing in the buildings. Other improvements are anticipated.

The halls also provide a base for Beds RCC projects, such as the Dunstable Consortium, Digital Inclusion sessions and the provision of a wellbeing space where residents can meet, gain support and enjoy some light refreshments.

The halls host our community gardens, which have shown significant improvement by utilising a derelict and overgrown space around the hall. Volunteers have engaged in garden activities which improve their mental and physical wellbeing by working as a group outside. The garden gained an award from *Dunstable in Bloom* as the 'Best Community Garden 2023' and participated in the community group Wheelbarrow competition.

In September, we welcomed staff, trustees, volunteers and past users to the opening of our community garden.

Community Engagement

We supported ten communities with the development of their Neighbourhood Plans. This support often included undertaking Housing Needs surveys and facilitating the production of Green Infrastructure plans. Using online and postal surveys, facilitated workshops and face-to-face drop-in sessions, we enabled many residents to have a voice in planning and decision-making within their communities.

Voluntary Sector Support

We continued to provide information, support and signposting to a range of community groups seeking assistance with funding, governance and community engagement. We supported the planning and hosting of Central Bedfordshire Council's *Cheering Volunteering* event.

Community Transport



Part of the bus fleet in the Cardington car park



Celebrating the resumption of full service and £1 ticket offer



Door to Door & Greensand Country Dial-a-rides

Community Transport plays a vital role in meeting the needs of vulnerable individuals throughout Bedfordshire. This year was a challenge with the previous year trading loss. We focused on gaining additional work whilst still delivering a great service to our existing contracts. In 2023-24, we travelled 52,164 miles, with 9,445 journeys.

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
- **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.

The Dial-a-ride services continued to make a difference to those in our communities who needed it. Both contracts are running via an extension arrangement. Communications with both councils for continued service has begun and we hope will be successful in 2024.

Contract Work

Community Transport has needed to look at additional contract work to support sustainability and has built gradually. We will continue to look for additional work across Bedfordshire.

Bedford Mobility Hub

Mobility Hub property lease deed of surrender was accepted and agreed and dated as 9 March 2023, but this was not confirmed in writing by Bedford Borough Council until 28 March 2024. The building is no longer Beds RCC's responsibility.



Community Rail Partnership (CRPs)

Beds RCC is the lead partner for two Community Rail Partnerships:

- **Beds & Herts CRP** covers stations between Bedford and St Albans City
- **Marston Vale CRP** covers the Marston Vale Line (Bedford to Bletchley)

Both CRPs work to engage the local community and help people get the most from their railway, promoting social inclusion and sustainable travel, working alongside train operating companies to bring about improvements.

2023-24 was a challenging year for both CRPs, primarily due to regular rail strikes and the ongoing lack of a full train service on the Marston Vale Line. Marston Vale CRP launched a marketing campaign to celebrate the resumption of the full service and introduction of the £1 ticket offer in February 2024.

Marston Vale CRP secured funding from Rookery South Community Trust Fund for phase two of the Lidlington Youth Engagement Project (a youth group meeting weekly in term-time).

Beds & Herts CRP marked the 50th anniversary of the rebuilding of St Albans City station with the unveiling of a mural in the Booking Hall and a photo exhibition.

The CRPs worked together to arrange Christmas concerts at Bedford Station, raising over £350 for Tibbs Dementia Foundation and over £420 for Bedford Foodbank.

Supporting Culture and Heritage



Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre



Dunstable Cultural Consortium 1940s Fun Day

Supporting culture and heritage was a new area for us this year, introduced by our new Strategic Plan. We want to support the culture and heritage of our communities to ensure the preservation of the rich history, traditions and identities of different communities and societies.



Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre

We are responsible for Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre, a Grade II Listed building dating back to 1846, designed by the Duke of Bedford. We restored it between 2007 and 2013.

We are open to the public with a museum, gift shop, tourist information point, tea room, and office and meeting space. This year was quieter due to the lack of regular trains on the Marston Vale line, but the volunteers continue to do a wonderful job manning the shop and conducting tours of the building and museum.



Dunstable Cultural Consortium

Dunstable Cultural Consortium has now completed its series of planned projects under the High Street Heritage Action Zone as of February 2024, and the group is currently looking to the future to continue to build upon the achievements of the last couple of years.

Through celebrating local heritage, arts and culture, the 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 in their community and beyond.

Dunstable Cultural Consortium successfully delivered over 12 projects and events planned by local voluntary groups who make up the Consortium. These projects and events included: Art Trails, a 'Talking' Blue Plaques Trail, Memory Workshops, an app and Heritage-themed Fun Days.

Corporate and Community Business



Rails to Roots volunteers at Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre



Wellbeing at Warden Abbey Vineyard project

This section combines our two new Strategic Plan areas of 'Community Business' and 'People and Partners'. This area focuses on our corporate teams, people and partnerships and our not-for-profit trading arm. This area operates across the whole organisation, providing services and support to all departments, as well as our two not-for-profit businesses.

Finance and HR Management

The finance team grew this year with the addition of an Assistant Accountant in September 2023, along with the appointment of an Executive Assistant who took over the HR records function. This has supported the team to grow and aided the organisation's policies and procedures.

Marketing and IT

This was a hugely busy year for our Marketing and IT teams. The Marketing team took on the responsibility for the marketing of our Vineyard and, along with other new projects, this has meant lots of new design briefs using our skills in-house rather than externally. Our following across social media increased (see page 29) and we were very lucky to win some awards with the support of the team.

BRCC Trading Services Ltd

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity operates a wholly-owned subsidiary company entitled BRCC Trading Services Ltd, the purpose of which is to raise funds to support the charity. The directors of the company are: Paula Grayson, Ian Riches, Tim Marcus (*resigned February 2024*), Mark Robins (*resigned February 2024*) and Tracy Cowan (*Secretary*).

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

- Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room
- Warden Abbey Community Vineyard



Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room

The Tea Room had a productive year with close to 4% growth on 2022/23. There were some themed events such as “Festive Afternoon Tea” and “Mother’s Day Afternoon Tea”, along with some of the Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership Heritage Open Day events and baby shower bookings.

The Courtyard Garden has been improved with flowers and cared for by the Beds RCC *Rails to Roots* group (see below). They are hopeful to plant vegetables in April 2024.

The impact of the suspension of train services continued from December 2022 until February 2024 when the full timetable resumed, and there are some ongoing reliability issues.

We ended the year with some staff mobility, which will need to be addressed in the new financial year to enable the provision to continue to grow.

Office and meeting space

The first-floor offices are let on a leasehold basis. Income from these tenancies is used to contribute to the running costs of the building.

Volunteering

The day-to-day operational activities of the Heritage Centre rely predominantly on the support of a dedicated team of volunteers from the Friends of Ridgmont Station. The 15-strong team of Station Friends contributes an average of 1,500 hours each year, and are essential to its ongoing success.

The Heritage Centre is fortunate to have a number of Station Friends who have previously worked within the rail industry. Having had many years’ experience, they are able to provide visitors with in-depth knowledge of how the rail system operates with additional anecdotal input.

Rails to Roots

A new wellbeing garden group *Rails to Roots* started meeting weekly at the Heritage Centre in May 2023, led by Beds RCC’s Community Garden Support Officer. The group offers an opportunity for people suffering from anxiety or low mood and those without their own gardens to enjoy being in a green space, make new friends, grow their own food, and help redevelop the garden into a beautiful space.

Session times have been designed to connect with train times. Members of *Rails to Roots* have also been involved with tree and hedgerow planting in the Heritage Centre car park.

Residents of *Really Flexible Care*, an assisted living residence in the local area providing care for people with learning disabilities and on the autism spectrum, have recently joined the group.

WARDEN
ABBEY

*The community
vineyard*

Warden Abbey Community Vineyard

Beds RCC manages the Warden Abbey vineyard as a community project, in order to provide rewarding volunteering opportunities locally while also continuing to make award-winning local wines. This year was extremely challenging. We had issues with disease on the vines, coupled with an inexperienced new Vineyard Manager who left in October 2023. The original Vineyard Manager came back for an interim period and to steady the decline of the vines. During the harvesting day, the team picked around 0.6 tonnes of our grapes. This has been our lowest yield and will affect us in a couple of years' time in terms of new stock. We have chosen to make this batch of harvest into a new variety of pink sparkling wine, which should produce around 600 bottles and will be a limited edition to help us recoup financially with a more expensive product for sale in the future.

The community vineyard experienced a period of change following long-term manager Jane Markham's departure at the end of 2022. The year started well and pruning was completed as planned by an ever-willing group of volunteers. As the year progressed the wet weather and delays to the regular spraying programme was all the encouragement that mildew needed to set in, and once mildew is established it's very difficult to shift. This affected numerous UK vineyards in 2023.

The Vineyard Manager recruited to replace Jane Markham left in August and Jane kindly and briefly returned to supervise the harvest and shutting the vineyard down for the winter. Despite the valiant efforts of the volunteers, the harvest was very small and will result in around 450-500 bottles of rosé fizz when combined with some third-party red grapes to establish a commercial volume. This will be a unique, very limited edition wine brought about by the small harvest and capitalising on the need to maximise the value of the winemaking process.

In January 2024, Nick Williams joined as interim Vineyard Manager and has proved to be a great success. Nick's experience and expertise is greatly appreciated by the volunteers and, whilst 2024 is unlikely to be a bumper crop, everything is being done to keep mildew at bay and help the vines to recover.

The vineyard was also the location for several Green Social Prescribing and Well-being sessions run by other teams in Beds RCC, as well as the location for team-building and social events. Our volunteers contributed over 5,000 hours to the project during the year - both working on the vines as well as running a busy programme of fundraising events.

Despite the mildew in the vineyard, tours, picnics and paella evenings were all very well attended, culminating with the highly-anticipated September Open Day, where we welcomed over 500 visitors.

The Friends of Warden Abbey Vineyard continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the vineyard project through their committed volunteer efforts, both in fundraising and all aspects of viticulture in the vineyard.

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 Beds RCC'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: Beds RCC 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 Finance Committee. The Board will review this reserves policy annually.

Financial review

During the year, the charity and its trading subsidiary BRCC Trading Services Ltd raised income of £2,370,069 (3,548,222 in 2022/23) 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. A proportion 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 £2,571,804 (£2,808,071 in 2022/23), with the result that the overall net movement in funds for the year amounted to a deficit of £201,725 (£740,151 surplus in 2022/23).

The trading deficit evident in 2024 primarily reflects situations where income was received for the purposes of delivering specific projects and programmes in 2023 with some of the resulting expenditure falling within 2024. This is an appropriate presentation of the income and expenditure and reflects our commitment to responsibly manage and allocate resources over the duration of our projects including those which span more than one financial year.

Finance Review continued

Transfers have been made to increase/reduce the balance in the Fixed Asset Reserve to £1,155,911 (£1,150,708 in 2022/23), to match the total net book value of the fixed assets as at 31 March 2023. The Other Designated Reserves Policy (Contingency & Buildings & Vehicle Maintenance) has been maintained at the same level.

Social Media

A wide range of our projects and services have seen positive social media growth, using the pages to connect with the community and share good news stories. You can follow us on the accounts below.



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
@BedsRCC

Beds & Herts Community Rail Partnership
@BandHCRP

Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership
@MarstonValeCRP

Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre
@RidgmontStation

Warden Abbey Vineyard
@WardenVineyard

Your Wellbeing Bedfordshire
@WellbeingBeds



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
@BedsRCC

Beds & Herts Community Rail Partnership
@BandHCRP

Dunstable Cultural Consortium
@DunstableCulturalConsortium

Dunstable Community Halls
@DunstableCommunityHalls

Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership
@MarstonValeCRP

Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre
@RidgmontHeritage

Warden Abbey Vineyard
@WardenVineyard

Your Wellbeing Bedfordshire
@WellbeingBeds



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
@BedsRCC

Dunstable Cultural Consortium
@DunstableCulturalConsortium

Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership
@MarstonValeCRP

Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre
@RidgmontHeritage

Warden Abbey Vineyard
@WardenVineyard

Plans for the Future

1

Continue to grow our Community and Wellbeing Service, securing funding from LAs/ ICB and the Primary Care Networks, and further expand into Green Social Prescribing, Digital Isolation and Children and Young People areas.

2

Expand our Community Transport service through increasing the range of services and projects, and look for greener opportunities for the fleet.

3

Look for opportunities to continue the refurbishment of Dunstable Community Halls.

4

Continue to develop our presence in the south of the county and Luton.

5

Continue to expand our Rural Housing offer to provide the full Rural Housing Enabler service.

6

Continue to develop the Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network.

7

To acquire full museum accreditation for Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and develop the offer.

8

Develop our Culture and Heritage offer, including a feasibility study for developing a community eco-building for our Community Vineyard.

9

Continue to develop collaborative relationships with other local organisations and within the ACRE Network.

10

Continue to look for opportunities and diversify income streams where possible.





Coupled with its innovation, modern amenities and warmth of its community spirit, Bedfordshire may be small in size, but it is mighty in character and full of heart



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