



Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity

Annual Report
2024-2025





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 2024-25.

Towards the end of the year, our Chief Executive - Tracy Cowan - announced she would be moving on from the Charity in May. Consequently, as the newly appointed Chief Executive, it falls to me to introduce this report for a year that proved to be the last of seven years where we were led by Tracy.

Firstly, I would like to thank Tracy for the ideas, energy and years of service that she gave to the Charity - and the support she gave to our staff, volunteers and communities. We wish her well for the future.

2024-25 was the first year of service delivery against our new 4-year Strategic Plan. The co-produced plan confirms our mission of building, connecting and serving communities who care for each other's wellbeing and the environment. Given our mission and the priorities identified within our strategy, it is no surprise that so many of our year's highlights involve both wellbeing and nature through our Green Social Prescribing offer. Community gardening, Wellbeing Walks and other nature-based wellbeing activities build community cohesion as well as providing multiple personal benefits.

It is gratifying to see how our activities and successes over this past year have all contributed to achieving this mission - seeing individuals, communities and the environment being cared for and gaining resilience.

As you will read in the following pages, the year got off to a great start with various awards for our projects and partners, achieving both national and local recognition (and, in the case of our sparkling wine, world recognition!).

Through ongoing enhancements to our Dunstable Community Halls, more residents are attending more community activities. In addition to the provision of our own services - including digital inclusion, social prescribing and a community hub 'Welcome Space' - many local organisations hire our range of rooms for their activities and services. We have continued to run and support other community hubs within the county, including at the Jubilation Centre in Bedford and a new Welcome Space in Sandy.

The year also saw the expansion of our Rural Housing service, including the establishment of the Bedfordshire Rural Housing Partnership - seeking to help communities identify and meet their local affordable housing needs.

None of our achievements over this past year 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 collaborate to make a difference.

Thank you for being a part of our mission - I look forward to our continued journey in the coming years.

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cliff Andrews', written in a cursive style.

Cliff Andrews

Beds RCC Chief Executive (as of 1st June 2025)

Message from our Chair

Looking back on the year 2024-25, I am delighted to thank Patrons, Trustees, senior managers, team leaders, front-line staff and volunteers for living the first year of our Strategic Plan in building, connecting and serving communities. Through our collaboration with partners, the resilience shown by everyone in meeting challenges and the empowerment given to our clients, we have been transforming lives for the better.

Our professional behaviours, level of motivation and successful outcomes ensured people are caring for each other's wellbeing and for the environment. We enable people to feel safe, supported and actively engaged in their communities whether through volunteering or belonging to active groups.

In addition to carrying out their normal Board assurance and governance roles, Trustees discovered our Chief Executive, Tracy Cowan, had been persuaded to take on a complex role with another local organisation. Staff, volunteers, Trustees and Patrons wished her well for the future at a sad and celebratory gathering in Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre. Through a good practice selection process, Trustees welcomed Cliff Andrews as our new Chief Executive. This internal example of empowerment embodies our wider intention to empower people through building capacity in communities and individuals. Trustees know that Cliff intends to ensure the momentum generated by initial delivery of the Strategic Plan continues. For all our staff, Trustees are supporting wellbeing opportunities. Staff wellbeing enables effective delivery for clients and award-winning outcomes for projects and services. Through the year, I have heard examples of positive outcomes for clients from front-line staff, team leaders, senior managers, volunteers, Trustees, Patrons and partners.

Thank you for the creativity, innovation and thoughtful delivery of objectives throughout 2024-2025 to ensure this is a strong, progressive and enormously valuable charity.



A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paula Grayson".

Paula Grayson
Beds RCC Chair

About Us



The Beds RCC team at the staff summer BBQ at Warden Abbey Vineyard

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (Beds RCC) is the leading community development agency working across Bedfordshire, with a proven track record built up over more than 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 purpose

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

2024-2025

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 2025 and Director of BRCC Trading Services Board*)

Mrs June Barnes

Mr Christopher Barker

Mr Tim Hill (*Resigned 17 October 2024*)

Mrs Ann Lovesey

Mr Ian Riches (*Also a Director of BRCC Trading Services Board. Resigned 14 January 2025*)

Mrs Sukhi Kooner (*Also a Director of BRCC Trading Services Board*)

Mr Craig Smith (*Resigned 24 March 2025*)

Mr Mark Liddiard

Mr Ashok Khandelwal

Mr Joel Carre

Mrs Joanne Makepeace (*Appointed to Board on 14 January 2025; as Mrs Joanne Kalsi listed with Charity Commission on 15 April 2025*)

Mrs Janet Ridge (*Interviewed during 2024-25 to be appointed to the Board for 2025/26*)

Mr Justin Richardson (*Director of BRCC Trading Services. Appointed 1 July 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
- Dunstable Community Halls
- Community-led Planning

Health and Wellbeing



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

- Social Prescribing
- You Can Do IT!
- Jubilation Hub
- Youth 2 Adults
- Welcome Spaces

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
- Warden Abbey Vineyard

Green Infrastructure and Sustainability



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

- Green Infrastructure, including Green Wheels
- Biodiversity
- Green Social Prescribing
- Wellbeing Walks

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 (Marston Vale and Beds & Herts)

Corporate and Community Business



Includes our finance team, marketing and IT, 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

Cliff Andrews
Deputy Chief Executive & 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

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

Welcome Spaces

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

2024

April

King's Award for Voluntary Service

April was filled with Good Neighbour Scheme news and developments. New groups were launched in Milton Ernest and Pavenham. Houghton Regis Helpers (HRH) were delighted to receive the King's Award for Voluntary Service at Houghton Regis Memorial Hall on 18 April. This award is the highest award given to volunteer groups across the UK, and receiving it is a huge honour.



2024

May

Time2Connect wins award

The Beds RCC project Time2Connect won the Mayor's Pride of Houghton Regis Award. The Time2Connect team was amazed and delighted to receive the Mayor's Award and to hear the wonderful citations that were read alongside the presentation. The team said that "it is a wonderful thing to be appreciated and valued for the work we do and have done, and we are honoured to have received this special award for our work."



2024

June

Warden Abbey wins at wine awards

Warden Abbey Vineyard was delighted to receive a Bronze Medal at the 2024 Decanter World Wine Awards for its 2019 Sparkling Brut. The Vineyard had a bumper harvest in 2019 – one of the best since 2010 when Beds RCC took over the vineyard and set up the community project. The volunteers work throughout the year to tend the vines and we are very proud that the quality of the wine we produce has been recognised by the industry.



2024

July

Cheering Volunteering annual event

We once again partnered with Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) to stage the annual Cheering Volunteering event. Cheering Volunteering recognises and celebrates the work of our remarkable local volunteers who contribute so much to our communities. Around a hundred volunteers attended the event at CBC's Priors House with a buffet, live entertainment and raffle. Our own Mike Fayers led a short wellbeing walk in the local woods, which was joined by nearly half of those attending.



2024

August

Gardening fun at Ridgmont

A volunteer work party from East West Rail joined us at Ridgmont to help out with our garden. Some of the volunteers shared their thoughts: "It was lovely; everyone was so welcoming from the first minute." "Thoroughly enjoyed the whole day, it was great fun!" "The museum, tearooms and station house are fantastic – keep up the good work!"



2024

September

Wellbeing in the Wild launched

Together with Bedford Borough Council, we launched Wellbeing in the Wild - weekly group nature-based activities aimed to help support the wellbeing of women who are pregnant or have a baby under the age of one. These activities encompassed the Five Ways to Wellbeing - Connection, Be Active, Learn, Take Notice and Give Back. The sessions offered a chance to meet other antenatal parents or parents with young babies. During the sessions, we offered simple seasonal activities inspired by nature, including mindfulness and art.



2024

October

Warden Abbey Vineyard mentioned in national media

Warden Abbey Vineyard was mentioned in a Telegraph article on grape harvesting. From the piece: "Grape picking is a great way to meet like-minded people, while doing something outdoors which is good for physical and mental health. There's a fun, purposeful atmosphere, and whether you're actively picking or on a break from snipping, it's sociable. You'll discover a lot about how grapes are grown and how wine is made."

Warden Abbey Vineyard, Old W
Planted in the late 1980s, this 4.6 acre vineyard is a community and managed by Bedfordshire Rural Volunteers. Volunteers work here all year round, but there is help with one day of picking, estimated to take place from 9am and picking goes on till lunch time. At Warden Abbey vineyard, there is no power so bring a thermos of coffee. Provided and experienced coordinators will be available. Email at wardenabbeyvineyard.org.uk

2024

November

Rails to Roots video launch

Our Community Rail and Green Wellbeing teams were busy creating a great new video, showcasing the Rails to Roots wellbeing gardening group at Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre. The community garden vision was always to become a showcase for community rail, and also become a new reason for people to travel along the lovely Marston Vale line that connects Bedford to Bletchley.



The Rails to Roots group is a gardening group.

2024

December

Leighton Linslade celebrates ten years

The Good Neighbour group Leighton Linslade Helping Hands (LLHH) reached its 10th anniversary. To mark the occasion, the group held a celebratory evening at Leighton Buzzard's Ship Inn, where volunteers and clients past and present got together with other special guests to have fun and to reflect on ten years of LLHH helping their local community. Simon Patterson, who is part of Beds RCC's support team for all the Good Neighbour schemes in Bedfordshire, presented a commemorative thank-you certificate to Liz, the group's chair.



2025

January

Looking after people's winter wellbeing

We continued to develop our Wellbeing and Warm Spaces offer over the winter period in many different Bedfordshire locations. These spaces were for people to come to enjoy a hot drink, some company and support, if they need it. These spaces are free and anyone is welcome to come along. In related work, we also started recruiting for Winter Warmth Agents.



2025

February

M.E.E.T. making a difference

Our fantastic volunteers from M.E.E.T. (Men. Engage. Exercise. Talk.) spoke at the Bedfordshire Mental Health Alliance event on men's mental health. They did an incredible job highlighting the impact of M.E.E.T. and the positive difference it makes for the young men who attend. We are so proud of their dedication and passion!



2025

March

Social Prescribing Day

We finished the financial year off by celebrating Social Prescribing Day. Over the course of a week, we promoted all the fantastic work that our Social Prescribing team does. Delivering social prescription across Bedfordshire has been a significant part of the work within Beds RCC, and we are really proud of our team, the work that we are delivering and the difference it makes to those taking part.



Supporting Communities



Leighton Linlade Helping Hands celebrating 10 years



Milton Ernest Good Neighbour 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.

This year, we supported 44 schemes within the Bedfordshire network. By March 2025, we had 1,247 volunteers who, over the year, carried out more than 33,900 tasks. We ran training sessions covering Safeguarding Level 1 (via the CVS and Virtual College); Support for Carers and Powers of Attorney (via Carers in Beds and Pictons Solicitors) and BT/EE's Digital Switchover affecting those on Telecare and people reliant on landlines.

In the rural parts of the Borough, new schemes were launched in Pavenham in April 2024, Great Barford in August 2024 and in Biddenham in February 2025. These are all going strong. In Central Beds, Stondon Good Neighbours very kindly decided to expand their coverage to include Henlow - where residents are delighted to have access to this new support. 2024 also saw Leighton Linlade Helping Hands reach an important milestone when they celebrated their tenth anniversary.

Following the official royal announcement in November 2023, Houghton Regis Helpers were presented with The King's Award for Voluntary Service (KAVS) in April 2024 by His Majesty's Lord Lieutenant at a ceremony attended by Beds RCC's Chief Executive. Equivalent to an MBE for Volunteer Groups, the KAVS is the highest Award given to local voluntary groups in the UK.

More recognition followed in January 2025, when Wootton Good Neighbours volunteer Malcolm Chalmers was awarded a British Empire Medal in the New Year's Honours list - nominated by local residents grateful for his support over the years.

Bedfordshire schemes have assisted an average of 1,340 residents each quarter, many of whom are recurring beneficiaries receiving help on a regular basis, while 881 residents this year contacted their local 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.

We have three part-time Community Agents who work with specific communities in Central Bedfordshire, thanks to local funding arrangements. Our agents in Central Bedfordshire cover Biggleswade, Pottton and Leighton Linlade.

Overall, our team of Agents supported 1,040 individual clients, including 623 new clients. 722 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 three Neighbourhood Plan groups; we provided support to groups via phone and email and also through attending their Neighbourhood plan steering group meetings.

We also worked with Bedford Borough Council to run a workshop for Neighbourhood Plan groups and Parish Councils on monitoring, implementing and updating your Neighbourhood Plan.

We worked with five 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 ten 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.

Funding secured from Defra, via ACRE, enabled us to recruit a new Rural Housing Enabler. In 2004/25 we launched the Bedfordshire Rural Housing Partnership; Beds RCC chairs these meetings and we have membership from two Local Authorities and five Registered Providers working in Bedfordshire. These meetings provide a valuable opportunity for a cohesive partnership approach to progressing affordable rural housing for local people.



Village Halls and Community Buildings

The Beds RCC Village Halls Advisory Service (VHAS) was able to support village hall and community building management committees, including some church halls with information and advice throughout the year. Support was given by phone and email, but also backed up by in-person visits to meet hall Trustees. The Service responded to 175 enquiries from 102 halls throughout the year. Issues covered governance, trustee roles, fire risk assessments, funding, licensing, VAT and maintenance.

Quarterly newsletters, 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. As a result of the above activities, some halls were able to change their governance structure to a corporate structure or CIO.

In addition, halls were invited to participate in Village Halls Week, based on the theme of 'Celebrating Volunteers'. The VHAS provided two Zoom sessions around volunteer recruitment and retention. The service also works with Central Bedfordshire Council to update the village hall survey covering hall condition and needs. This evidence base helps to inform S106 funding, which may be available to help improve their halls.

The VHAS gained funding for improvements at Great Denham, with the installation of solar panel improvements, and at Stevington Community Halls by developing a church room into a community hall. Other funding options were discussed with our partner CVS Bedford.



Dunstable Community Halls

Dunstable Community Halls (DCH) continues to provide hireable space to local residents of Dunstable and surrounding villages. Regular activities such as Pilates, children's dance, karate, adult education, health and wellbeing and church meetings continue to grow. Barclays in the Community also uses the site, currently two days a week; it provides essential banking services to those who otherwise can't easily access their bank.

The comfort of our users has greatly increased with the provision of air conditioning and other improvements.

The halls also provide a base for Beds RCC projects, such as You Can Do IT! and the provision of a weekly wellbeing space, where residents can meet, gain support and enjoy some light refreshments.

The halls host our community gardens - Lily's and Tim's gardens. Both 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 2024' and participated in the community group Wheelbarrow competition.

Our activities at the halls focused on promoting wellbeing within Dunstable, which was recognised by receiving the Community Award from Dunstable Town Mayor's Community Award 2025.



Time2Connect and Timebanking

Time2Connect closed its doors to residents in summer 2024 as funding for the project came to an end. We received three months' transition funding to enable us to work with residents who attended the project to ensure they were able to access suitable support networks elsewhere.

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 1,200 hours of support in their communities.

Health and Wellbeing



A Community Wellbeing Champion at a local session



M.E.E.T. group enjoying a session of badminton



Social Prescribing

Our Community Referral service is a Social Prescribing service that supports adults across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire to make sustainable changes to their health and wellbeing. Following a competitive tender process, we have successfully retained the local authority element of this contract; we continue to offer all referral pathways: Statutory Services, Self-Referral, VCSE. Through our Primary Care contracts, we deliver CRSP to six Primary Care Networks across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire.

This year, we have continued to embed our Community Wellbeing Champions (CWCs) into secondary mental health services. Through our partnership with East London Foundation Trust, CWCs are part of the new 'front door' to secondary mental health services. Having a presence across Primary and Secondary care enables us to direct people to the right care at the right time.

Along with our core universal offer of Wellbeing Walks and nature-based activities, we have worked with NHS colleagues to see how we can focus our Green Social Prescribing offer to meet the needs of those who are unable - or less likely - to access green spaces.

During this year, we have seen an increase in referrals into the service with the main reasons for referral being poor wellbeing and isolation and loneliness. Engaging our community assets and identifying need has helped us to build a localised intelligence about communities. In-person community drop-ins continue to be vital to the delivery of Social Prescription; residents can enjoy free refreshments, make a connection and access support. The Jubilation Hub is now supporting approximately 40 people per week, delivering craft sessions, a history group and darts!

During the past year, the service has received over 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.



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 to 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 2025. 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 have added groups in Sandy and Flitwick.

A partnership with Be Active, which 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!

Jubilation Hub

In partnership with our funder, Big Local, we have continued to successfully deliver the Community Drop-in at the Jubilation Hub. This welcoming space supports residents in accessing a range of services, becoming more physically active, enjoying a hot drink, soup or roll, and making meaningful connections within their community.

Over the past year, we have celebrated key community events, including VE Day and Christmas, bringing people together through shared experiences. We have also embraced all things green with our bespoke Green Social Prescribing workshops, encouraging wellbeing through nature-based activities and sustainability-focused engagement.

Youth 2 Adults

As part of the Mental Health Collaboration Fund, Beds RCC was proud to partner with Music 24 and the Dunstable Cultural Consortium to deliver the Youth 2 Adults (Y2A) project, which has now completed.

Feedback from the young people involved has been overwhelmingly positive, with many reporting improved wellbeing, new friendships and greater awareness of opportunities available to them beyond the group.

As part of our ongoing strategic priorities, Beds RCC is committed to expanding our work with children and young people. We recognise the importance of early intervention and the long-term impact that meaningful support can have during formative years.

Welcome Spaces

We have Wellbeing Spaces across Bedfordshire for people to come to enjoy a hot drink, some company and support, if they need it. These spaces are free and anyone is welcome to come along.

Our Dunstable Wellbeing Space runs every Thursday at our own Dunstable Community Halls. Attendees enjoy a range of activities, including helping in the community garden. Our Community Connections Advisor and Social Prescribers are available to ensure attendees are able to access any advice and support needed.

Funded by Communities First, between January 2024 to January 2025, we had 834 attendances at the Dunstable Wellbeing Space, and over 60 individuals.

Green Infrastructure and Sustainability



Wellbeing Cafe at Dunstable Community Halls



A volunteer tending to garden space in Dunstable



Green Infrastructure, Ecology and Conservation Volunteering

We provide a range of community and countryside initiatives, including wildlife conservation and volunteering. This year, we have been developing several Green Infrastructure plans for villages, including facilitated workshops, online surveys and drop-in engagement sessions.

We host the Upper and Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership, working with over 30 partner organisations to achieve a shared vision for our rivers and their catchment to be healthier, richer in wildlife and valued by all.

Beds RCC also leads on a number of 'Green Wheels' (linking publicly accessible green spaces and routes within and around communities) in the Ivel Valley area. In addition to enhancing existing Green Wheels, this year we supported the master-planning for the Ampthill & Flitwick Green Wheel and the identification of other communities for future Green Wheel master-planning.

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. The group undertook over 40 tasks, including habitat creation and management, and access enhancements to countryside sites. For nearly 20 years, we have run Wellbeing Walks across Bedfordshire, through which we deliver over 40 walk programmes.

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.



Green Social Prescribing

Our Green Social Prescribing programme continued to offer residents a wide range of opportunities to get outside and engage in nature-based activities to support their health and wellbeing.

Highlights include the enhancement of our community gardens. At Ridgmont, our Rails to Roots garden group was able to harvest its own vegetables this year in its new grow-your-own raised beds. During the year, corporate volunteer teams from East West Rail supported the project at Ridgmont by planting and helping to maintain a new wildlife-friendly hedgerow in the station's car park. At Dunstable Community Halls, our food garden was complemented by the creation of a new, relaxing Wellbeing Garden.

New groups during the year included running a weekly Nature & Wellbeing space for women in the peri-natal period at Queens Park Family Hub in Bedford and supporting the setup of a new 'Incredible Edible' food growing project in Sandy. We continued to administer and support over 30 Wellbeing Walks across Bedfordshire, including new Wellbeing Walks that started in Dunstable and Barton, and set up a new weekly walk at Jubilee Park to support those returning to activity.

Our Green Wellbeing Directory continued to grow, signposting to over 100 opportunities for residents to join groups, activities or places in green spaces across Bedfordshire.

We continued to share our experience of Green Social Prescribing, including through ELFT Peer Support groups, ICB BLMK Sustainable Health & Care Seminar and joining a panel at Natural England's Green Social Prescribing Eastern Region event.

Community Engagement

We supported two communities directly 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 play an active role in partnership forums including the Bedfordshire Advice Forum and Central Bedfordshire Voluntary and Community Sector network meetings.

Community Transport



Part of the Beds RCC vehicle fleet



Beds & Herts CRP shortlisted in the Community Rail Awards



Dial-a-rides Service

Community Transport plays a vital role in meeting the needs of vulnerable individuals throughout Bedfordshire. This year, we have reduced our costs by restructuring our office team. Our vehicle fleet remains at five buses (three years ago we had seven buses and a WAV car). In 2024-25, we travelled 45,016 miles, with 9,181 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 have been rebranded:

- **Door-to-Door Central Beds** (formally known as Greensand Country), serving northern Central Bedfordshire
- **Door-to-Door Bedford Borough** (which serves the entirety of Bedford Borough)

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. The Door-to-Door Central Beds Dial-a-ride now has a five-year grant rather than a contract. The Door-to-Door Bedford Borough Dial-a-ride continues to run via an extension arrangement.

Contract Work

In the last year, we have reduced our contract work due to the decrease in fleet capacity. We still transport multiple passengers to two separate day care centres.



Community Rail Partnerships (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.

Marston Vale CRP ran an extensive marketing campaign to promote the resumption of the full service and £1 ticket offer during the year. This contributed to a 57% rise in passenger journeys.

Marston Vale CRP worked with Art Inspired students at Youth Inspired to install a series of mosaics at Bedford St Johns. The project was runner-up in the 'Small Projects Award' category in the 2025 National Community Rail Awards.

Beds & Herts CRP has been working with schools and local community groups looking forward to Railway 200 celebrations in 2025. For example, we worked with Year 4s at The Camp School, St Albans, members of the Herts Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders (HACRO), and the Emmaus Herts Community to create a Railway 200-themed bench which will be sited in the St Albans Signal Box Museum garden - one of our widest-ranging Community Rail involvement projects to date.

The CRPs worked together to arrange a Christmas concert at Bedford Station, raising over £175 for Bedford Foodbank.

Supporting Culture and Heritage



Teaching the history of Warden Abbey



Christmas craft workshop participants with Book Angels

Motivated by our Strategic Plan, we want to support the culture and heritage of our communities to ensure the preservation of Bedfordshire's rich history, traditions and the identities of its different communities.



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 offices and meeting space.

Visitor numbers significantly increased following the resumption of a full train service on the Marston Vale Line.

For more information about the activities of Ridgmont, see page 26.



Warden Abbey Vineyard

Our on-going partnership with the Friends of Warden Abbey Vineyard helps us to understand and celebrate the site's rich heritage.

For more information about Warden Abbey Vineyard, see page 27.

Corporate and Community Business



One of the Ridgmont tea rooms



Harvest Day at Warden Abbey Vineyard

This section combines our two 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 had a challenging year with a reduced staffing capacity, but continued to provide excellent support to the wider organisation. This capacity issue is being addressed by the appointment of a new Finance Officer, coming into post in June 2025. The Executive Assistant has continued to successfully manage the HR records function. This has supported the team and aided the organisation's policies and procedures.

Marketing and IT

This was a very busy year for our Marketing and IT teams. Due to staff changes, the Marketing team has had to work with reduced staff hours. The Marketing team continues marketing support of our Vineyard, as well as lots of other internal Beds RCC projects. This has meant significant new design work using our graphic design skills in-house. Our following across social media continues to develop 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, Sukhi Kooner, Justin Richardson (appointed 1 July 2024) and Tracy Cowan (Secretary).

The main trading activities of BRCC Trading Services Ltd have been: Warden Abbey Community Vineyard; Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room (moved from BRCC Trading Services into the Charity during the year).



Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and Tea Room

The Tea Room saw an increase in footfall following the resumption of the full train service. There were some themed events such as “Festive Afternoon Tea” and “Mother’s Day Afternoon Tea”. The Tea Room also hosted a number of birthday parties and other family celebrations.

The resumption of the full train service also resulted in a significant increase in visitors to the museum with over 30% travelling by train, including a number of ‘Try the Train’ journeys arranged by Marston Vale Community Rail Partnership (CRP) for a range of community and school groups.

Marston Vale CRP Heritage Open Day events took place at the Heritage Centre in September and included a Bedfordshire Brickworks Exhibition and model railway display of Ridgmont Station in the 1950s.

Awards

Ridgmont Station was the winner of the East Midlands Group in the 2024 World Cup of Stations (theme celebrating local businesses at stations) and progressed to the semi-finals.

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 20-strong team of Station Friends - plus the Rails to Roots group (see below) - contributed over 1,800 hours during the 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

Our garden project, Rails to Roots, continued to run at the Heritage Centre. As well as providing a local activity to support wellbeing, the project has greatly enhanced both the outdoor spaces of the site and visitor experience.

Rails to Roots includes a fortnightly garden group, which people can access by train from stations along the Marston Vale Line. It has also benefited from volunteer teams from the rail industry giving time to help enhance the wildlife features of the site.

This year, Rails to Roots was featured as a case study in the Rail Delivery Group’s Value of Rail report. This included the creation of a short film to showcase the

project and how it demonstrates the value of rail to local communities. This film can be viewed from the Rails to Roots page on our Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre website. Rails to Roots continues to attract national interest, including an invitation to present at the Network Rail Green Network.

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 but in a completely different way to the disease issues from the previous year. Despite a very wet spring, the disease risk was under control and fruit set well as the summer progressed. As harvest approached, the vineyard was attacked and devastated by birds who devoured 90% of our crop. We were expecting to pick around 3 tonnes but by the time the harvest took place, having been brought forward due to some bird damage, only 0.37 tonnes were eventually picked. This was even lower than the previous year's all time low and was extremely disappointing when all the previous indications were of a reasonable yield. This was the first time the vineyard had been struck by significant bird damage and a number of mitigations are being put in place to try to prevent a reoccurrence.

This extremely low volume needed to be topped up with some purchased Reichensteiner grapes to enable wine to be made economically. We have chosen to make this harvest into a Nonconformist still wine, which should produce around 700 bottles. The 2024 Nonconformist will be brought to market in 2025 to supplement our dwindling stocks of still wine.

Vineyard Manager Nick Williams was extremely disappointed, having managed the recovery of the vineyard through the disease issues of last year. Nick's hard work, good humour and excellent knowledge and experience have been very valuable and, despite the bird-damaged harvest, the Community Vineyard is thriving. The volunteers and donors planted 450 new Bacchus vines to fill gaps and ensure that the vineyard has a thriving future.

The vineyard was also the location for several Green Social Prescribing and wellbeing 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.

This was a successful social year with tours, picnics and paella evenings all very well attended, culminating with the highly-anticipated September Open Day, where we welcomed over 700 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)** Remain resilient and manage risk in an increasingly uncertain and volatile operating environment.
- b)** Accommodate cash flow pressures at a time when a number of Beds RCC's income streams involve payment in arrears.
- c)** 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 Senior 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 £2,320,235 (2,370,069 in 2023/24) 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 £2,411,779 (£2,571,804 in 2023/24), with the result that the overall net movement in funds for the year amounted to a deficit of £91,544 (a deficit of £201,725 in 2023/24).

The operating deficit evident in 2025 primarily reflects situations where income was received for the purposes of delivering specific projects and programmes in previous years and the resulting expenditure fell within the current year. 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.

Transfers have been made for the value of fixed assets purchased in the year, so the balance in the Fixed Asset Reserve of £1,119,185 (£1,155,911 in 2023/24) matches the total net book value of the fixed assets as at 31 March 2025. The other designated reserves (Contingency and Buildings & Vehicle Maintenance reserves) have 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



New Chief Executive Cliff Andrews at Warden Abbey Vineyard

1. Seek opportunities to engage with ICB and Local Government reorganisations.
2. Continue to grow our Community and Wellbeing Service, further strengthening relationships with Health sector partners.
3. Further expand our range of Green Social Prescribing activities.
4. Broaden the scope of our Digital Inclusion offer.
5. Expand our Community Transport service through increasing the range of services and projects, and look for greener opportunities for the fleet.
6. Seek opportunities to continue the refurbishment of Dunstable Community Halls.
7. Continue to develop our presence in the south of the county and Luton.
8. Build on the recent growth of our Rural Housing offer, providing a full Rural Housing Enabler service.
9. Continue to develop the Good Neighbour and Village Care Scheme Network.
10. Seek to expand the number of Community Hubs/ Welcome Spaces and the range of services they offer.
11. To achieve full museum accreditation for Ridgmont Station Heritage Centre and develop the offer.
12. Develop our Culture and Heritage offer, including working with the Friends of Warden Abbey Vineyard to further enhance its facilities and activities.
13. Continue to develop collaborative relationships with other local organisations and within the ACRE Network.
14. Continue to look for opportunities to 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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