

Annual report of the Chair of the Trustees

Presented to the Annual General Meeting, October 27, 2023 at Beech Village Hall

A year of consolidation

After a bumper year in 2021-22 following the lifting of Covid restrictions, our social events have been less well supported in the latest financial year, which ended on June 30, 2023. However, hall hirings have been steady, the fabric of the Hall and green spaces remain in good shape, and we returned a small financial surplus.

The social hub for the Beech Community

The main focus for social activity within our community has been the Friday morning coffee shop and the monthly socials on the last Friday evening of the month.

The Friday coffee shop continues to be popular. We took the difficult decision to reduce the hours to 10am-1pm, as our small base of volunteers were finding it difficult to cover the entire day, and there was limited attendance in the afternoon. This has resulted in some very busy Friday mornings, however, with a lively atmosphere and many new friendships made.

The monthly Friday evening socials were all well attended, and the volunteer cooks very much appreciated the informal booking system, which gave them an idea of how many people might wish to eat. These have provided a great opportunity for old friends to get together, and for newcomers to the village to meet up with their new neighbours, in a convivial and informal atmosphere. The July 2022 social took the form



of a village barbecue, which was particularly well attended and provided an opportunity for younger villagers to take part.

The Christmas Fair was once again a successful day, organised by Sally Cox, with a good variety of stalls to tempt us with interesting gift ideas.

In March 2023, the hall was packed for the Comedy and Chilli evening, with three quite different comedians and a compere to make

everyone laugh. Volunteers provided excellent home-cooked chilli and dessert for everyone. Many thanks for Carol Kemp and her team.

Other social events have become more challenging to organise. Informal feedback suggests that, after the hiatus caused by Covid, many people in Beech who have previously attended village events have become much busier with family commitments, holidays, work and, sadly, in some case, health issues. As a result, it has become more difficult to find volunteers willing to organise complex events, and even when we could, a number of events had to be cancelled due to insufficient bookings.

We have begun to move towards simpler events with less reliance on volunteers. We had planned to run a party to celebrate the Coronation, but instead we simply invited villagers to bring picnics, chairs and gazebos for an informal gathering on the Village Green. This turned out to be a well attended and fun afternoon for all ages.

Hall bookings

We continue to host around a dozen clubs and classes each week, including bridge, baby and toddler classes, dance, pilates and yoga. The Beech Art Group meets in the Annexe every week, and Beech Embroiderers meet every other month. However, some of the clubs and classes are still running with reduced numbers since the pandemic so we are doing our best to support their marketing efforts. Some new classes began in 2023, including Tai-Chi and a Deep Meditation Soundbath, but unfortunately they did not attract enough attendees to be viable in the long term, despite good support from the village itself.



We are still very busy with weddings and private parties, demand for which has held up well after the surge in interest after the pandemic, and despite an increase in prices and a slight reduction in hours to address neighbours' concerns about noise. Our Hall and village remain very attractive and we consistently receive very positive feedback from hirers. We are very proud of our average review score on Google, 4.7 out of 5.



Kimberley Fowell
8 reviews · 1 photo

★★★★★ a year ago

This is by far the best village hall in Alton and the surrounding area - spacious, bright, modern and clean with amazing facilities. We had to move our party twice due to covid and the manager couldn't have been more helpful. Lovely play area for the kids outside and plentiful parking - highly recommend!

Managing the Hall and green spaces

The Hall has not required too much maintenance attention this year. The lights in the car park failed during the winter, and have been replaced by a low-voltage LED system. In response to a noise complaint, we engaged an expert firm to conduct a noise survey and purchased a noise monitor, which we can use to check noise levels remotely. We also resolved issues with the automatic system which cuts off power when noise levels reach an unacceptable level.

On the Rec, Nick's Little Copse goes from strength to strength, with many saplings now poking out of their support tubes and the whole area providing a nice mix between being accessible and being wild and natural.

The collection bin for clothes, shoes and bed linen outside the Hall provides a useful resource for the village, while supporting the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Air Ambulance.

Public benefit

Many Beech residents have enjoyed the coffee shop and monthly socials, as well as the Christmas Fair, comedy evening and Coronation picnic. Our green spaces continue to be appreciated.

None of these activities would happen without volunteers. A great camaraderie always develops as volunteers come together to support their village, and this in itself boosts our community spirit.

Managing the charity

Sadly, we lost a long-standing and enthusiastic member of our management team when Ian Gibson passed away in April. Anne Whitaker stepped down from her role as chair of the social team at the end of the financial year but remains a member of the management team.

Our cleaner, Max Laney, left us in the Spring and Chris Foote has taken on an expanded role of caretaker/cleaner. Sarah Branch continues to cover our book-keeping, accounts preparation and bookings administration needs. Simon Hodgson is often busy behind the scenes making sure everything in and around the Hall is in working order, and out in the open cutting the grass, and Sheila Sorby has the lead on making sure the green spaces are tidy and attractive. The Alton firm of accountants, Wettone Matthews, have once again kindly reviewed our accounts on a *pro-bono* basis.

Our financial position remains relatively strong, as we have maintained our bookings revenues and kept our costs roughly consistent with previous years. However, our smaller social programme has resulted in a reduced contribution from social events, and in the previous year we benefited from grant funding to help us rebuild our operations after the pandemic. Although our surplus is lower, our cash position has improved, and we are now starting to earn interest on our refurbishment fund, which is earmarked for future development of the Annexe.

Recent developments after the year-end

In response to changing demand for social events, the Social team have conducted a survey across the village, to find out what people really want us to organise. This will inform decisions about our future social events programme. Many thanks to everyone who responded.

It has become increasingly difficult to find volunteer cooks for the monthly socials, so we have decided to bring in external caterers for them, starting in September 2023. Although this means a slight increase in price, it allows these much appreciated events to continue. There is no longer a need to book, but we can't ask our caterers to cook unlimited quantities of food, so it will be available on a first come, first served basis! The bar and coffee shop will continue to be run by volunteers.

I am delighted to welcome Dan Soutar and Karen Littlewood to the management team. Dan has been helping with the bar and coffee shop and is providing thoughtful input on team decisions. Karen is now chairing the social team and will be working with her team on our future social programme.

Thank you

Our community depends on a team of a great team of volunteers who run the Hall and the Rec. A huge thank you to our management team, who work so hard to ensure the Hall and its surroundings are in fine fettle, and our social team, who provide a great programme of events for villagers to enjoy. If would like to join us, you will find village life all the more rewarding, so please let me know if you can offer a bit of your time and expertise.

Many other people contribute to village life; cooking, baking, serving coffee, bartending, emptying dog poo bins, erecting the marquee and so on. There are way too many to name individually, but heartfelt and abundant thanks to you all.

I also want to thank our team of contractors who help us run the Hall and Rec – Chris Foote, Simon Hodgson, Sarah Branch, Max Laney and Lucy Loosemore.

We have many new villagers and I want to welcome you to this stunning village. It's great to have been able to meet many of you and get to know you.

Dr Jane Freeman-Hunt

Trustee and Chair, Beech Village Hall & Recreation Ground Management Committee
October 27th 2023