

BEDFORD ROWING CLUB

AGM 30 September 2021

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

In opening my report at last year's AGM I referred to my health which had regrettably caused me to miss three Committee meetings. I'm glad to say that there has been no recurrence in this past year. I have missed no meetings for health reasons, and my consultant has declared me to be in full remission.

Much of the last year has been taken up with negotiating the demands and restrictions visited upon us by the Covid pandemic. Our Head races in February and April once again had to be cancelled. The annual Regatta in May and the River Festival have also been postponed to next year. Though not strictly Bedford Rowing Club events, we typically expect to participate actively and raise significant funds through them. Nonetheless it has been heartening to see the gradual increase in rowing both in single sculls and in crews. I won't tread on the Captain's toes by addressing the details, but it has been heartening to see the Clubhouse, and the hard, thronging with rowers and coaches at busy times. Equally it's encouraging to see that our Learn to Row courses remain popular, with an extensive waiting list despite our having to suspend operations until relatively recently. This bodes well for the future of the sport in general and our Club in particular.

In these challenging circumstances I'm relieved that the Club has been able to maintain a reasonably strong financial position. It must be said that much of this is attributable to grants and other exceptional business support directly related to the pandemic. As I outlined last year, the Committee devoted much time and effort to making sure that our expenses were trimmed to the bone while we were unable to run our usually profitable rowing events, and could not open the bar. The Treasurer will have more to say about the finances.

The re-opening of the bar had to be postponed several times as Government restrictions came and went, but has at last been achieved as you can see – cheers! We have an open liquor licence, and a marketing group has been established to promote the bar as widely as possible. That includes venue hire, and daily use for drinks and increasingly for our food offer. Please come in and use your bar, and pass the word around – it's open to all.

Apart from standard, recurring resolutions, the main business of last year's AGM related to the plans to move from the rowing and social clubs' unincorporated status to a new structure where limited companies would be formed to take over the assets and operations of the Clubs. This would represent a more modern business and governance structure appropriate to an organisation of our nature and scale, and should better protect our members and Committees from personal responsibility for the Clubs' financial liabilities.

The good news is that the two limited companies were formed in February of this year, with the intention of implementing the transfer with effect from immediately after our financial year-end of 31 March 2021 as envisaged by last year's AGM resolutions. The less good news is that we then found that our bank HSBC – in common with most others, as we now understand it – was not prepared to open new business bank accounts for any customers. Apparently this resulted from widespread fraud in relation to the Government's support

funding for businesses during the pandemic. It seems new companies were being set up by fraudsters, who would make off with the grant funding, leaving the company to go bust.

Our Treasurer felt it would not be right for the transfer to go ahead without bank accounts opened in the names of our companies. The bank itself made clear that the pre-existing accounts of the Clubs could not be transferred to the companies. I reported on this to members in one of my Presidential updates posted on Facebook earlier in the year.

By the time our bank lifted its embargo on new business accounts and our Treasurer felt able to address the matter, the Club's accountants advised that it would be better to postpone implementation of the restructuring until the next year-end at 31 March 2022 to avoid a costly, additional set of interim accounts. Following discussion in the light of that advice, the Committee reluctantly decided to postpone accordingly. Last year's AGM resolutions provided sufficient flexibility for the Committee to adjust the original timetable.

Obviously I'm disappointed that we have not been able to implement our plans in line with the original timetable. Doing so for 2022 will still involve significant effort, particularly by our Treasurer, but I'm optimistic that given goodwill on the part of all involved it can be achieved at this second attempt. I'd like to stress however that members' experience of rowing, training and social facilities at BRC is not going to change materially as a result of the restructuring. Nothing ground to a halt as a result of the spanner thrown into our works by the Bank, other than the technical changes in our constitutional framework. Fortunately our day-to-day activities carry on unaffected by all this constitutional guff/stuff.

Members will in due course be asked by the Treasurer to put in place new standing orders for subscriptions in favour of the new, company bank accounts. The amount of your subs is not being changed by the restructuring, and I appeal to you to help make the process as smooth as possible by completing your new standing order when you are asked to do so.

I also mentioned in last year's report that I had initiated a project to devise a five-year strategy for the Club – to take stock of where we stand, and to set forth targets for how we want to see it develop and grow. Members were asked earlier this year to respond to a survey, to tell the Committee their views on the Club's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – a SWOT analysis as it's known. I was delighted that very many members contributed their views.

There were criticisms of course, but this process was never intended as an excuse for the Committee or officers to give themselves a pat on the back. All views, positive and negative, are being taken into account. By and large however, the responses demonstrated an engaged and enthusiastic membership with a keen ambition for BRC to become a leading Club in the Eastern region. In broad terms, members favour a Club with strengths across the board rather than any particular niche, and a Club that is at the heart of the local community taking seriously its obligations as a Community Amateur Sports Club open to all without discrimination.

The membership survey was devised and implemented by Hugh Maltby as Deputy President, and he subsequently worked up the results into a first draft Strategic Plan which was very well received by the Committee. Regrettably however, Hugh then found it necessary to resign from the Committee due to pressure of work. That has been a loss, and has resulted in some delay. However, an executive sub-group of the Committee has taken

up the task and has done further work on this, with a view to presenting it to members for approval once that work has been reviewed by the full Committee. I anticipate that we will then convene an EGM – an extraordinary general meeting of members – to seek your approval.

The Strategic Plan, once adopted, will in effect set the Committee's forward-looking agenda for the forthcoming period. It will set out clear objectives designed to achieve a number of goals. That will hopefully introduce a pro-active element into the Committee's workings and minimise any temptation simply to react to events. Hopefully it will also give all members a clear understanding both of what it means to be a member of Bedford Rowing Club and of what the Club's standing in the community is and is intended to become. The Strategic Plan will be an evolving document; members will be periodically consulted and the goals and tasks adjusted as appropriate over the course of time.

I mentioned that the restructuring will impose additional burdens of work, particularly on our Treasurer. The Strategic Plan, too, will tend to increase rather than reduce the burden of work. In one of my presidential updates to members in about July I pointed out that we need to rely heavily on the skills of our members and your willingness to contribute to the running of your Club. I asked for volunteers for a number of posts. Some of you came forward, and we have candidates for office this evening who will be new to the Committee.

Fresh insights will make a positive difference, I'm sure. However we did not attract as many volunteers as I had hoped, and we have some posts this evening which will remain vacant for want of any candidate. That is a little disappointing and means that in the short term at least, if we are to avoid placing increasing burdens of work on a diminishing number of people we will have to resort to co-opting onto the Committee individuals who have not been presented to the wider membership for election. That's not how it's supposed to work.

Please, therefore, consider whether you could make a contribution whether on or off the Committee. If you haven't considered this before, it may surprise you to learn that the Club doesn't run itself. **Let's get real: if you don't help, we will be able to do less for you, not more.** There are rewards in serving on the Committee – notably at this time the opportunity to influence the content of the Strategic Plan and thus shape the future of your Club.

To conclude on a slightly happier note, you may be encouraged to learn that joining the Committee would not necessarily result in finding yourself swamped by a daunting burden of administrative work. We have recognised the need to organise ourselves better than we have, and to enable Committee members to focus on strategic priorities rather than mundane, day-to-day leg work. We have therefore recruited a paid Administrative Officer. She is Siân Clark-Rodney, and will start working with us part-time during October. You may know her already; she is the wife of Club member Chris Rodney of the Men's Intermediate Squad. I have not been directly involved in Siân's recruitment so others will be more au fait with the details than I. However I am assured that she was the stand-out candidate from among a number of potentially suitable ones, and brings a wealth of directly relevant experience. I look forward to welcoming her to the team, and trust that you will also.

Finally I thank the Committee for their hard work and commitment during the year.

MARTIN BANHAM-HALL
Club President