

# BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

The relationship between businesses and charities

# Introduction

Heart of Bucks' 'Vital Voices' events are community forums that give a platform to small, grassroots organisations in Buckinghamshire. We aim to help them connect with influential people on key issues to create change and make a difference.

This event, *'The relationship between businesses and charities'*, focused on how we can create more meaningful partnerships between the charity sector and the private sector.

We welcomed Philippa Batting (CEO of Bucks Business First) and Michael Garvey MBE (Managing Director of Chandler Garvey) as our guests to join the conversation and listen to concerns and insights from the local charities and community groups. Heart of Bucks were joined by representatives from:

Chiltern Music Therapy  
Chiltern Open Air Museum  
Chiltern Rangers  
Citizens Advice Bucks  
Community Impact Bucks  
Community Youth Ventures

Connection Support  
Headway Thames Valley  
One-Eighty  
Talkback UK  
Youth Concern

We were kindly hosted by the team at Buckinghamshire New University, at their Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury.





# Key Insights

## **The role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

Many businesses, particularly larger ones, have established CSR programs that focus on contributing to their communities. However, in Buckinghamshire, only 85 of more than 31,000 businesses have over 250 employees. As such, Bucks Business First's (BBF) strategy focuses on encouraging smaller businesses to voluntarily engage in charitable activities.

By promoting the benefits and facilitating opportunities for community involvement, BBF and Heart of Bucks often collaborate to create a culture of giving and support within the local business community. Discussions emphasised that CSR is not just about monetary donations but also involves time, effort, and expertise. The group discussed that it is often difficult to balance the needs of business and charities but there were examples of strong local partnerships developing.

A topic of discussion was how both sectors could expand the idea of CSR to coordinate more widely on bigger, strategic problems, for example skills and employability, to have a greater impact and perhaps leverage in larger national funding programmes.



Photo: Guy Redshaw



## The importance of long-term relationships

There was great emphasis on the need for long-term, local partnerships between businesses and charities. Short-term, one-off engagements often fall short of making a significant impact. It is important for businesses to buy in to the vision of the charity and be part of making change happen; to want to be a part of the journey. This is highly valued for successful relationships. This type of targeted relationship, sustaining over a long period, has real value for both parties.

Charities highlighted that businesses should have realistic expectations about what small charities are able to offer and understand the capacity constraints they face. This is particularly true of 'one-off' volunteering requests where the benefits to charities are less apparent. Sustainable partnerships that evolve over time are crucial for meaningful contributions and mutual benefits.

## Volunteering vs. Donations

There was discussion around the relative value of volunteering time vs. monetary donations. Charity representatives pointed out that while volunteering is valuable, monetary donations are often more critical – especially for smaller charities. Volunteering can be resource-intensive for charities, often involving costs that businesses may not consider (not to mention complications around safeguarding and working with vulnerable individuals which makes one-off volunteering impossible for some charities).

Financial support can be a more effective way to assist these organisations, however businesses often find this less attractive than volunteering – as with skills-based volunteering supporting 'behind-the-scenes' functions such as finance. This can cause certain charities to be overlooked and receive less support when they are not set up in a way to accommodate short-term, unskilled volunteers in their service delivery.

Both sides understand a need for transparency about the costs associated with volunteering – however charities do not always feel comfortable in doing this when partnerships are not approached on an equal footing. All parties recognised the need for being open when discussing the financial and time costs for charities offering volunteering days. Some charities had already started providing an upfront 'cost per volunteer' for businesses making enquiries, and it was agreed this was something the sector should consider more widely. This creates a 'win-win' dynamic for both sides.



Photo: Kim Russell



## The need for simplicity and clarity

A significant obstacle was identified for businesses. How can a business understand what charities offer and how do they support? There is a desire from the business community for simplicity when engaging with charities. Both businesses and charities face numerous challenges and limitations, and clarity on deliverables and expectations is essential. Businesses prefer straightforward processes and clear communication about how their contributions will be utilised. This approach helps to build trust and ensure productive, mutually beneficial partnerships. Charities are often understandably pressed for time and deal with complex social problems, which creates a disconnect.

There was also a sense that businesses will often gravitate towards national, well-known charities for the ease and simplicity. For a business wanting to contribute but not knowing where to turn, it is easier to pick a high-profile organisation with the budget for extensive advertising campaigns, rather than having research the county's 2,400 local charity organisations.

Organisations like Community Foundations are well-placed to provide some of the simplicity that businesses need but are not always able to provide the extensive financial support that a large and diverse charity sector needs.

## Challenges in communication and engagement

Small charities face significant challenges in communicating and engaging with businesses. Despite investing notable effort in outreach and targeting local companies, responses can be minimal, and this can discourage future efforts. Effective communication strategies and platforms are vital to bridge the gap between businesses and charities, however neither side has the resources to spare.

Local platforms like BBF can play a pivotal role in facilitating this mutual understanding and showcasing offers to businesses. The group agreed that simplifying the process and making it easy for all parties to engage is essential, and it was suggested that a similar model to BBF could work for the VCSE sector to help with signposting.

The concept of an accumulator platform or 'Not on the High Street' model, where businesses can see and purchase packaged volunteer opportunities or products such as meeting venues, was also explored. Such platforms would help reduce complexity and confusion and improve the efficiency of business-charity interactions. It was noted, however, that this would require significant development resource and funding.

Community Impact Bucks's Volunteer Matching Service was highlighted as having a similar purpose, laying the foundations for further development of a much more powerful platform.



Photo: Derek Peverill





## The power of two-way relationships

It is important to understand the different types of relationships that exist between charities and businesses. Team-building days are not the same as individual volunteering commitments over an extended period, and painting walls or fences is not the same as skills-based volunteering or pro bono work. All have their place, but some are of higher value and impact.

Individual organisations on both sides will have their own needs, capabilities and offers, and finding a good match is essential. Volunteering and support are not simply a beneficent gesture to the charity and businesses need to recognise that they are gaining something that they would likely have to pay substantially for in another context (for example, a team-building day organised by a private company).

It is important that relationships are viewed as two-way and transactional to build a more equal partnership. In many ways, charities and businesses should have a 'business-to-business' approach to partnering, as both parties are offering something that has a value.

## Local focus and collaborative efforts

There was a strong emphasis on local focus and the power of community-based initiatives. Business leaders advocated for supporting local charities and pooling resources to strengthen the sector. The idea of a 'Give Local' campaign was discussed to rally both businesses and charities around a common cause. Collaborative efforts, such as shared branding and coordinated fundraising campaigns, were seen as ways to amplify impact without having access to the vast budgets that national, well-known charities utilise for marketing.

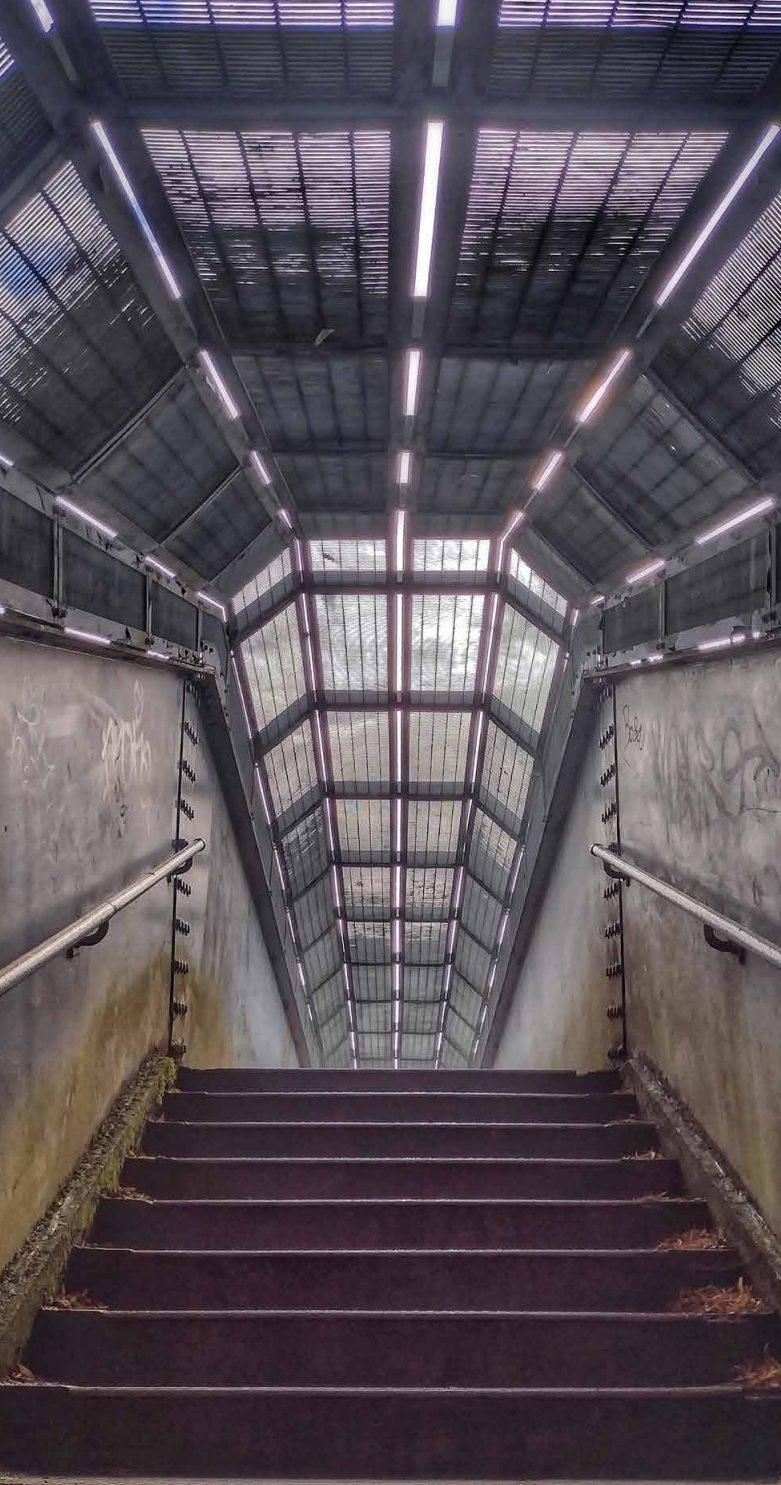
It was however recognised that fundraising can be a difficult and competitive landscape, and with in-year financial pressures, smaller charities might struggle to pass up the opportunity for an immediate financial donation. There is an implicit 'trade-off' between coordinated and individualised efforts that might be a barrier.

With most small businesses in Bucks, place-based connection is extremely important. These are often owned locally, with local employees who are connected to their communities, local schools and social organisations.

Forum participants explored the potential for events such as virtual expos and large-scale charity showcases to help connect charities with businesses. These initiatives could help charities present their offerings effectively and provide businesses with easy access to opportunities for engagement. Collaborative efforts could amplify the impact of individual organisations and strengthen the overall community support network. Resources are needed to enable projects like this, but they have significant merit if delivered successfully.



Photo: Guy Redshaw



## Marketing and awareness

Training and raising awareness were identified as crucial for enhancing engagement between businesses and charities.

Participants highlighted the importance of understanding platforms like LinkedIn and how they can be used effectively for networking and promoting charitable initiatives.

Providing training on social media algorithms and best practices for online engagement could help charities maximise their visibility and attract business support. The discussion also touched on the need for charities to proactively engage with businesses rather than waiting to be discovered.

Costs associated with targeted or specialist marketing skills were identified as an obstacle for charities. It was suggested that pro bono support from the business sector in marketing and communications might be a sensible offer to bridge this gap. Charities could consider requesting pro bono marketing support as part of their engagement with local businesses.

# Voices of the Community



*Frankie Hockham*

**VCSE & Community  
Development Officer**

**Community Impact Bucks**

“As an organisation supporting charities across Buckinghamshire, we valued representing their voices at the Vital Voices forum organised by Heart of Bucks. This meeting provided an important platform for the VCSE and business sectors to discuss barriers to collaboration and suggest solutions.

We often encounter charities eager for corporate support but unsure how to approach it. The forum reinforced the importance of building long-term relationships based on open communication, extending beyond financial support to include skills-based volunteering and resource sharing.

We’re hopeful that the insights shared will lead to increased local business support for Buckinghamshire charities, strengthening collaboration between sectors.”

# Voices of the Community



*Martin Curtis*

**Chief Executive  
Chiltern Open Air Museum**

“Thanks to Heart of Bucks for convening such an insightful group from the voluntary sector and to our colleagues at Bucks Business First for leading the discussion on the potential for greater collaboration between companies and not-for-profit organisations.

It was a really useful forum to be part of and there was an honest exchange of information and ideas. It was clear that we’re all pretty good at building networks with others in our own sector. We often lack the means of connecting effectively with those outside of it. The session helped identify that problem and began the process of raising the understanding of what both parties need of each other.”

# Voices of the Community



*Chris Keating*

**Chief Executive  
Connection Support**

“Vital Voices provided a fascinating terrain for local business representatives and charity leaders to gain a greater understanding of one another. Whilst some areas of our work are incredibly similar, some differences are very tangible, making the space for this discovery all the more interesting and insightful. Whilst some innovative ideas were raised, the question of resourcing these innovations within the current financial climate remained somewhat illusive, and so whilst I am keen to keep the conversation lines open, I am unclear how we will achieve the great join-up both sides were passionate to achieve. ”

# Voices of the Community



*Philippa Batting*  
**Chief Executive**  
**Bucks Business First**

“As the CEO of Buckinghamshire Business First, my key takeaway was the importance of nurturing collaboration and innovation within our organisations. For me the discussion highlighted the need for a strategic approach to address current challenges and to leverage opportunities for collaborations. I was particularly impressed by everyone’s commitment to getting something done and our proactive efforts to identify new business models.

Moving forward, I think we need to continue to prioritise the customer journey for businesses who want to do the right thing and engage and support the VCSE. I look forward to building on the insights we all gained from this meeting to further build the bridge between businesses and the VCSE.”

# Food for thought

- Small charities and small businesses have many similarities. Successful small charities must run like businesses – the only difference is the generation of private profit vs community profit.
- Work experience provision is a challenge in all sectors and, like volunteering, incurs great costs. Could charities offer work experience packages for businesses to sponsor? This could aid home-grown talent and fit under a 'Give Local' strategy.
- Demand and need have rocketed for many charities (exacerbated by cuts in Public Sector funding and the Cost-of-Living crisis). How can charities be expected to invest more effort into promoting themselves when their service delivery is more stretched than ever before? This is a critical challenge for the sector.
- Can businesses come to appreciate the value of funding charities' core running costs rather than be drawn in by the publicity of volunteering in cases where it is of less use to the charity?
- Many charities are limited in how they can generate revenue. How can these organisations ensure they are not left behind?
- How big a priority is this relationship model for charities and businesses, given the multitude of pressures they both face? What shared priorities could make it more productive for both groups?



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Thank you to all the charities and groups that took part in our Vital Voices community forum:

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**Buckinghamshire: Uncovered - Vital Voices**

Helping grassroot charities be heard

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