Good evening everyone. It gives me very pleasure to deliver this, my first AGM Chair’s report and it’s good to be here in person. Our last AGM in 2021 was held entirely over Zoom. We have some participants on Zoom with us today but it’s lovely to see others here in person this evening at the centre.

This time last year things were starting to open up again, but it has been a very slow process and many of our user groups didn’t return until September of 2021, but the building is now full of life once more and we’re looking forward to an exciting 2022.

There have been lots of changes since last year, not least in the board of trustees. Steve Lilley and Mike Statham retired at the AGM after a mammoth contribution steering the ship when the centre was turned into a CIO. We did a presentation back in May to them to thank them for their efforts, but I’d like to reiterate our thanks here, so they are recorded for posterity. The current trustees, the staff and users of the centre will be forever grateful to them for everything they did to keep the centre open. Mike still does a huge amount for us in terms of gardening and mole prevention so continued thanks to him for that.

Then in July, Ray Woodward who was also on the first board of trustees who took over from the council announced his retirement from the board. Its lovely to see Ray here with us tonight and we’ll say a few more words about him later.

We’ve welcomed some new trustees, Hywel, Katy and Lydia have joined us since the last AGM and are already bringing a wealth of new skills to the board and we’re delighted they’ve joined us.

We have had staff changes too, many of you will have known May and Geoff Chadwick, our previous management assistant and caretaker respectively, who both retired at the end of July. We were very sad to see them go. Between them they had given so much to the centre including a huge amount of volunteering and we’re glad they made sure to finish the decorating before they left!

We have welcomed Claire Horne who has joined us in the office as our new management assistant to keep Tom in order and Carole is now a permanent member of staff as our events and bar manager. We have a great team here who work together to make the centre the welcoming place that it is for all our users and I’ll take this opportunity to thank Tom, Carole and Claire for their hard work, enthusiasm, patience and commitment.

In terms of physical changes, it won’t have escaped your notice as you come across the car park that we now have a large glass box on the outside of the building. Steve told you last year about the herculean efforts of Geoff and Pauline Walker and their international army of Instagram followers. I will be forever amazed by the power of social media; how a little community centre in North West Leicestershire can attract funding from the other side of the world is truly amazing.

The lift has been a goal ever since I’ve been involved in the centre, and it seemed to be all we’ve talked about in trustee meetings for many months! but it’s finally installed and working and will make the upstairs hall accessible to those with mobility issues who have never been able to attend our shows and other events upstairs before. So thank you to everyone both near and far who donated to the lift appeal. We hope to have a ‘lift opening’ party very soon when we will invite Geoff and Pauline to cut the ribbon and take the inaugural ride.

Projects like this, despite fundraising a large proportion of the cost, are clearly not cheap. We are fortunate to still have some funds in reserve that were a legacy from the days when the centre was council run and we earmarked some of that money to recent major projects such as the knock through and the lift. But it’s not a bottomless pit and needs using wisely. This is an old building and it needs some TLC! We need new windows (to help with heat retention and noise reduction), we could do with a more energy efficient heating system and the flooring in the corridors needs replacing. We have already made a start on the upstairs bar but the downstairs bar also needs refitting to give us more storage space and we would love to develop the space outside, but we can’t do it all at once and we need to think carefully about the order in which we tackle major projects and the grants that are available for projects such as these.

The pandemic hit us hard in terms of revenue, we were closed for the majority of 2020, and it is those accounts for the year April 2020 - March 21 that you will see today. Our initial business plan, written when the centre was turned into a CIO, projected a loss of approximately £10,000 a year for the first 3 years as we developed our systems and processes to make the centre fit for purpose.

2020 was projected to be the year we finally broke even, but when Covid hit in March we essentially closed the building to user groups and therefore our income dried up. We received several Covid relief grants and took advantage of the government’s job retention scheme and furloughed our staff but true to the spirit of people in this community they didn’t sit at home twiddling their thumbs, they recognised the needs of the people around them and brought everyone together to help. The army of volunteers who helped our village through that time kept the community spirit alive despite the centre being officially closed for business.

Our new preschool joined us later that year, they are a very welcome addition to the village and for several months they were our sole user group. Things started to improve later in the year, but a lot of our groups didn’t return until January 2021 and some not at all, so the accounts for that financial year 2020-21 show a loss of around £10,000.

The fundraising income for the lift is included in the accounts for that year so the balance looks artificially in credit by around £20,000 but around £30,000 was spent in August of 2021 so the following year’s accounts will look like we made a much bigger loss than we actually did. The latter part of 2021 was much busier in terms of events so the finances will look much more positive.

At this point I must thank Andy Brown, our treasurer for his endless patience and accurate adding up. We’re very grateful to him for keeping our money balanced and our records up to date.

And so to 2022. We are looking forward to a busy year. I can’t mention everything but to give you an idea of the range of users currently in the building on a regular basis we have pre-school in every weekday plus weekly or fortnightly meetings of Curling, language classes, art group, yoga, badminton, slimming world, Bobbin lace, TPADS, cheerleaders, meditation, Zumba, the WI and the Royal British Legion. We host our own monthly bingo and quiz nights, our eco market, open mic night, juke joint and our regular coffee mornings that have raised hundreds of pounds for a variety of charities.

We have built good relationships with external stakeholders; Tom sits on the board of the Leicestershire Violence Reduction Network and we are in partnership with Sport England to introduce new initiatives to increase the health and wellbeing of our community.

Bookings are coming in for birthday parties, weddings and other celebrations and we are very proud of the spaces that we can now offer to people wanting to book a special occasion, such as the beautifully decorated house lounge and this room, which with the new flooring and partitions can be made into one large function room.

We’re not perfect, this old building has its faults. I’m sure our neighbours will agree that we need to do better in some areas. It’s a tricky balance, in a centre with multiple users, making sure the lights get switched off every night and the heating is on at the right temperature for pre-school children in the day but not so hot that we waste energy, and we don’t always get it right.

We are trying, the trustees are all volunteers, and I must thank them for the endless hours that they dedicate to ensuring this charity is well governed. Our staff are all part time so we can’t keep an eye on everything that happens here 24 hours a day, but we are doing our best and we want to work with our neighbours and local community to ensure that this building serves its purpose for our area of benefit and creates a sense of community without creating unnecessary disturbance. We hope we demonstrated in the pandemic that we, the staff and trustees are truly community minded, and that the ethos and objectives of this charity are being fulfilled.

We may not be entirely out of the woods yet in terms of the pandemic and who knows what 2022 will bring but the building is slowly becoming more fit for purpose and for that I must thank everyone who has contributed to this whether you’ve designed, sanded, scrubbed, painted, rewired or rebuilt the various parts of the building, there have been a huge number of hours of volunteering gone into this place over the last couple of years from staff, trustees and many local residents and hopefully you can all see what a difference it has made.

Thank you and here’s hoping 2022 is a much better year for all of us.

Dr Amanda Berry

Chair of Trustees, Charles Booth Centre

March 2022