

# Minding its own business

Berinsfield Community Business is delivering a better quality of life for locals.



Rectory grounds are expertly maintained by BCB.

**E**stablished in 2002 as part of an Innovation and Good Practice project in partnership with Soha, (South Oxfordshire Housing Association), Berinsfield Community Business (BCB), is leaping ahead with pioneering community services.

Statistics show that Berinsfield is the fourth most deprived parish in South Oxfordshire, but if BCB continues to grow and expand its services to the local community as planned, Berinsfield's position can only get better.

Approximately 40 per cent of the properties in Berinsfield are owned by housing associations, the majority by Soha, which took over the District council's housing stock in 1997. Soha wanted improvements to the general environment in the village and, with help from an Innovation and Good Practice grant, set up BCB to build a strong community and make their services more directly

accessible to their tenants. Initially Soha 'held BCB's hand' and nurtured its young development, enabling it to become the success it is today.

The team behind BCB is made up of local representatives, who care passionately about the village and its future. Initially providing a number of services to 320 Soha tenants covering housing, rent and environment management, experience, hard work and dedication then lead BCB to provide grass-cutting and litter picking services on land in the village owned by Sovereign Housing and the Parish, District and County Councils.

In April 2003 BCB won the contract to deliver Soha's Assisted Garden scheme, providing a monthly grass-cutting service to 175 elderly tenants across the district. In April 2004, BCB added repairs management to its list of tenant services and Soha renewed the Assisted Garden contract for another year. Winning contracts and gaining trust in local communities, most importantly within Berinsfield, was a huge stepping-stone for BCB, and BCB's continued success means employment and training for the locals, an attractive and cared-for village, and pride within the community.

To cement the goal of caring for its employees as well as providing a top-notch service, BCB is currently aiming for Investors in People accreditation.


Mark Williams, the business director, is responsible for growing the business as well as the day-to-day management of the company. His role as a bridge between the staff and the volunteer board, and between the board and Soha means constant striving, monitoring and the stretching of limits. "Our relationship with Soha provides us with huge advantages. We are a small company – six staff and seven board members – but Soha always makes its resources available to us. I can call upon departments – such as HR and finance – within Soha at any time. This is a valuable pool of expertise and brings added professionalism and structure to the company. The

We have nearly 5,000 homes making us one of the largest landlords in the area. Most of our housing is designed for families and couples but there

is also supported housing for older people. Most of our homes are located in the four main towns of Didcot, Henley-on-Thames, Thame and Wallingford.



With encouragement and support from the local community we set up an independent community business to manage our 400 homes in Berinsfield. Berinsfield Community Business (BCB) employs local people to provide a local service to the community.

 **business for neighbourhoods**

  
**soha**  
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partnership with a larger organisation is an excellent model for budding social enterprises and I cannot recommend it enough".

The company prides itself on the quality of its work and the focus on local communities. Williams says: "Personal service from a local company is still high in demand but can be underrated. As the staff all live in or near Berinsfield, the personal connection is something we gladly offer. Soha decided that the personal touch was important. Of course, Soha is not alone in that, but going further and pushing responsibility for some housing issues into the community takes you straight to the core of those issues and quickly and efficiently drags them to the surface. We won't stop there though. We continue to strive. We continue to grow the business further by providing our grounds maintenance, gardening and decorating services to local parish councils and households."

2004 saw the first tentative steps into the parish council market, and Williams admits to some steep learning curves. "We obtained contracts with three local councils. It taught us a great deal about resource management and scheduling. And even more about grass – last year was a difficult season for all grass-cutting contractors across the country. However, the team pulled together – even I went out to help – to ensure we completed the contracts on time".

2005 has seen further growth, winning contracts with an astounding eight further councils as well as retaining existing business. BCB has also started grounds maintenance and cleaning work for the Vale Housing Association, also a key housing provider in the county. "Soha has never objected to us working for other Housing Associations. We have a small contract with Sovereign in Berinsfield, but working for The Vale builds on key strengths developed with Soha and enables us to grow the business in a controlled way independently. Growing the business means we spread our overheads and can offer Soha more value, benefiting them too. We are also taking on more private work. Sustainable growth is more important than being a flash in the pan. And as we grow, we will be able to distribute a portion of our profits to clubs and voluntary groups in Berinsfield. Earn profits outside the village – spend them on village projects – that is a key aim."

Managing the positive progression of the village so far is something the members of the BCB team are extremely proud of. But taking it to the next level – helping to move the community out of the 'deprived' category – involves tackling new areas and pushing their resources even further.

But far from being daunted by the task or viewing it as an impossible challenge, BCB is looking forward to creating a brighter future for Berinsfield. ■



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