

FUTURE FOUNDATIONS

In the almost four years since **Kenneth Crookston** became the Chief Executive Officer of Brass Bands England, the organisation has grown its membership, activities, delivery team and finances exponentially, despite the pandemic that brought the world to a standstill. **Nicola Bland** finds out how this astonishing feat has been achieved and how it is already benefitting UK brass bands

Since he became CEO of Brass Bands England (BBE) in May 2018, Kenny Crookston has presided over rapid growth of the organisation's staff team from four, three years ago, to 18 today.

This growth is in line with BBE's five-year vision from 2014, set out in Chairman Mike Kilroy's Report to the body's September 2020 AGM, in which he said that BBE needed to be relevant to the broader sector, professionally managed and with clear strategic direction, specific roles, and targets defined for the Board of Trustees and staff delivering a range of workshops and resources. Relevance to the broader sector was to involve developing an expanding strategic partnership network with national bodies and Government departments, to achieve significant benefits for the brass band community nationally. All of that has happened and the body now employs the CEO, along with 18 full and part-time specialists covering youth development, safeguarding, relationship and partnership development, the 'Archive Project', membership services, marketing, PR and communications, finance and fundraising, supported by a volunteer board of ten trustees, some of whom head sub-groups, the functions of which appear on page 13.

Successful significant strategic partnerships forged include, importantly, what Mike Kilroy's 2020-2021 BBE Trustees Report refers to as BBE's 'greatly valued' 'critical friend' – the Arts Council England (ACE), through Relationship Manager Richard Brown, who attends all of BBE board meetings. BBE also enjoys strategic relationships with agencies at Westminster, the Welsh Assembly, the NSPCC, education services, music hubs and the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), all combining to create undeniable national recognition of BBE, including from wider arts and culture. So what direct advantages does the CEO think such partnerships and national recognition accrue for brass bands? "For far too long, brass bands have been looked upon by many as a 'poor relation', but it is remarkable how quickly opinions can change when presented with a professional front by a body representing the majority of the country's most active bands. In the past two or three years, BBE's work, especially in safeguarding, Child Performance Licensing and Covid-19 advice, has been widely praised across the arts community, but more importantly it has contributed to a safer banding environment, and saved our members and their local authorities thousands of hours in administration time. Our relationship with the ACE has also been crucial in securing extra funding across the banding community, with individual organisations and events benefitting substantially during these past two very challenging years."

Setting aside BBE's own impressive expansion, more importantly the value of its membership product has convinced 468 brass bands, representing over 550 individual band groups and encompassing 17,000 individuals, to join – an increase of 76 organisations since the pandemic struck and two-and-a-half times greater than when the current staff team



BBE CEO – Kenneth Crookston

started coming together in 2018.

Such rapid growth obviously brings its own challenges and Kenny Crookston commented: "Having grown our team, in recent months, a major focus for the senior management team has been the implementation of a project management system to monitor, record and report the status of more than 50 current projects and programmes. The recent appointment of our Finance Manager, Bev Shephard, also provides greater stability through tighter budgetary control and the introduction of new accounting systems, meaning that the departmental model is working very efficiently. Our talented and diverse team is also brilliant at communicating with each other and there is a lot of interaction between them, along with communal support on our current projects."

Funding has obviously been critical to this rapid growth, and £397,325 from the Culture Recovery Fund has been vital. BBE has additionally been successful in securing £180,000 from The Backstage Trust, The Garfield Weston Foundation and The Foyle Foundation, generosity, says the CEO, which will present opportunities for "literally thousands of brass musicians in the coming years." Some £261,000 per annum is now being spent on employed staff from funding already secured, but it is hoped that some of that annual staffing cost will be met from BBE's next ACE grant as one of its National Portfolio organisations, for the period 2023-2026, while other funding streams are expected to meet any shortfall. A large proportion of the team's time since recruitment has been issuing Government advice about Covid-19, fielding inquiries from brass bands and getting them back to rehearsals safely. Throughout the pandemic, BBE's Relationship and Partnership Development Manager, Alex Parker, has been pivotal in liaising with the DCMS on potential dangers of Covid-19 in brass band settings, leading to band-specific advice being included in the Government's Covid-19 guidance.

To support brass bands, and given its scale of personnel and operation today, clearly BBE first needs to achieve its own financial sustainability, so has also recruited an experienced Fundraising Manager, Pamela Johnson, to spearhead grant applications, raise external commercial and private support, and hand-hold brass bands making their own grant applications because the ACE welcomes more than it is currently receiving. Kenny elaborated: "When launched during the next few months, this service will guide bands through the complexities of funding applications and project management, in the hope that the acquisition of such skills will help them to meet their aims and objectives independently in future. There is a lot more money out there than many bands realise, so the more we can do to empower as many of them as possible to undertake meaningful projects that enhance their members' experience, the better."

As in virtually all walks of life during the pandemic lockdowns, BBE moved its activities online, presenting 91 events, including 13 BandSafe and other

development and information sessions on Zoom and Facebook during 2020/21, some individual online videos viewed by over 10,000 people! This has been spearheaded by Digital Marketing Manager, Clair Donnelly, and BBE hopes that the benefits of this professional marketing will become increasingly clear as the brass band community continues to grow, from the bottom up, through BBE's ground-breaking Brass Foundations education programme – more of that exciting, pyramid-building project later.

November 2020 also saw the launch of BBE's 'Save our Brass Bands' appeal, supported by broadcaster and baritone player, Melanie Sykes, in which bands raised over £140,000. A follow-up campaign leading up to Christmas 2021, again underpinned by training seminars organised by Crowdfunder and BBE, saw a further £50,000 raised by member bands.

As the Covid-19 emergency escalated, Brass Bands England's stated priority was to support the brass banding community at a time of crisis when it was facing a significant downturn and, in some cases, a complete loss in income from concerts, contests and engagements. Yet another Crowdfunding appeal – the Brass Band Emergency Fund – was launched, through which the organisation made cash awards to bands totalling over £3,500, and a further £5,300 is still available for those continuing to face financial problems.

What of the Brass Band Archive? Although arguably not the most critical of projects in the middle of a pandemic, nevertheless, since the project started, BBE has spent £33,600 of its ACE Culture Recovery Fund grant on professional archivists, work that has received interest from Heritage Quay at the University of Huddersfield to locate the Archive there and open it to the public, for which agreement has been reached.

Kenny commented: "The transfer of archive material, from its former home in Wigan to Huddersfield University, via our offices in Barnsley, has been a massive project. Having over 8,000 sets of sheet music, plus thousands of other artefacts catalogued and moved, has already taken many hundreds of hours of work from our archivists and dedicated volunteers, and the brass band community worldwide will undoubtedly be thankful for their efforts when the collection becomes available during the next year."

As befell many events scheduled to happen from 2020-2021, BBE's flagship National Youth Championships were cancelled due to the pandemic, but not all previously paid costs could be recovered. These were offset by a successful application to the ACE yielding a further £11,000 to cover lost ticket sales, which according to Mike Kilroy's Annual Report last September, put the organisation 'back on track' financially. The Youth Championships are due to take place this year from 26-27 March at Corby Business Academy, for which Kenny says entry levels are slightly better than when the event was last staged in 2019, commenting: "Reconstruction of the rebranded Youth Champs in 2019 led to renewed interest from diverse communities in some less 'traditional' brass banding areas. The support of Besson and its new Prodigie brand, and the early effects of our Brass Foundations programme means that we have been able to build upon that early success. The non-competitive Debut Section, introduced in 2019, has grown considerably and will now feature 14 bands, many of which will be giving their first public performances, but we are very satisfied that the



Brass Foundations in action

competitive sections are also in a very healthy shape, considering the challenges that all youth bands have faced over the past two years."

Returning to the all-important rollout of the body's BandSafe programme that continued by transferring online during the pandemic, by last September BBE had given 700 individuals specialised training and a new contract accrediting the programme, extended again to cover musical groups outside brass banding now aware of its benefits, was agreed with the NSPCC. As the CEO has highlighted, BandSafe has already saved thousands of hours in band and local authority administration, and greatly enhanced BBE's standing within the wider arts community. When one looks at BBE's list of strategic partners for Bandsafe and the National BOPA (Body of Persons Approval) that it administers, one can see why. Amongst its BandSafe partners are the Department for Education on Child Performance Licensing, Warwick and Manchester councils, the English Folk Dance and Song Society, numerous brass band events in England, the Welsh Government, Ty Cerdd and the Welsh Arts Council, giving BBE the strong national voice in the arts world and, vitally, at Government level that it needs and set out to achieve.

Bandsafe is now in the hands of specialist Safeguarding Officer, Sam Fisher, whose remit is to grow the scheme across England and Wales, as well as to deliver and administer the related training programme.

Kenny outlined: "Government agencies in Westminster and Cardiff have recently renewed their approval for the scheme, which has also been extended to include other musical groups. While this expansion needs to be carefully monitored in terms of capacity, revenue and resource, it represents an exciting opportunity for BBE to extend its Safeguarding training, further grow its revenue and, by extension, benefit its membership."

Arguably the most important work currently being undertaken by BBE, for which it has spent £78,000 of Culture Recovery Fund grant during the past year, is its Brass Foundations project, launched in January 2021 and led by five Youth Development Brass Specialists – namely Paul Fisher in Hertfordshire, Sheila Allen in Warwickshire, Paul McLaughlin in

Gloucestershire, Deirdre Waller-Box in Camden and Helen Minshall in Lancashire.

Said Kenny: "In implementing the Brass Foundations project, considerable effort has been invested in consulting with bands and schools to establish need and barriers to continuation in brass. It has already been an outstanding success and is making significant strides in developing additional

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BBE's Gala Day at the National Coal Mining Museum in 2021



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Proms in the Playground

initiatives to roll out in the coming year.”

You might have spotted that four of the five specialists cover the Midlands and south, and that just one covers a northern territory – Helen Minshall in Lancashire. At the outset, BBE decided to employ the best applicants, regardless of geographical location, so that the pilot Brass Foundations had a better chance of succeeding and, in turn, attracting continuous funding, which, to be frank, would need to be huge to cover the whole of England indefinitely!

The pilot Brass Foundations project team forms partnerships with cultural organisations, schools and music education hubs to provide specialist brass tuition. The team has also hosted a live weekly ‘Bring Back the Brass’ Facebook show and led last summer’s successful Proms in the Playground initiative featured by BBC Radio 4 on ‘The World at One’.

Speaking about the pilot project’s initial success, Kenneth enthused: “Despite only operating fully in five relatively small areas, Brass Foundations is already receiving interest from music hubs nationwide as they begin to see the benefits of investing in brass education, demonstrated by our outstanding team led by Education and Development Manager, Sarah Baumann. Much of the programme’s success is due to the professional marketing and outreach that BBE can now support. For the first time, England has an organisation with the resources to sell the lifelong and wide-ranging benefits of brass banding to the wider community. There has already been considerable additional activity from the music hubs involved, while hundreds of children from diverse backgrounds, already introduced to brass instruments, are testimony to the growth that we can potentially bring to brass banding in general. However, it is about more than ensuring that brass instruments are handed to young people; it’s about ensuring their experience in brass is fun and that there are opportunities for them to progress to play in an ensemble that is right for them.”

What levels of funding and specialist teachers would it take to blanket-cover the whole of England with Brass Foundations, realistically, how is that achievable and how does BBE plan to retain beginner players? Said Kenny: “The vital link that Brass Foundations creates between music hubs and community brass bands will go a long way to creating a sustainable future for brass bands in these areas,” adding, “especially when the bands themselves have greater purpose and relevance to these communities, which is also a major aim of our band governance courses. Taking the programme truly nationwide is an aspiration that could take a very long time to achieve, but that should never stop us trying because, so far, the results speak for themselves. Realistically, future funding on a local level needs to be through individual hubs, but there has already been considerable interest in this respect, and we are confident that we can grow Brass Foundations at an appropriate and sustainable rate.”

How much funding does BBE need to spend in year two of Brass Foundations? “As things stand”, said Kenny, “the cost could be more than the £78,000 spent in year one and we expect it to increase annually from there. The ACE has granted us a £48,000 Project Grant for this year and the Foyle Foundation gave us £30,000. Other future funding applications are also underway.”

Space prevents charting all BBE’s considerable work outputs in 2020-21, but it would be fair to say that the 12 months represent the most prolific year in its history. Given the organisation’s self-growth, restructuring and external achievements in just under four years, Kenny was unsurprisingly upbeat when, concluding his 2021 CEO’s Report to the AGM, he stated: ‘I am satisfied that all aspects of our operation are carried out to a high standard and thrilled to manage a team that contains outstanding professionals who unfailingly deliver exceptional services, information and education, laying the foundations for better banding for the entire BBE membership.’

How, though, does he see the immediate and longer-term post-pandemic brass band landscape; what challenges does he think lay ahead for the culture and what can be done to meet them? “Many years from now, we may look back at the pandemic as a defining moment for brass bands, perhaps as impactful as the World wars, Great Depression or industrial closures of the 20th Century. It is already apparent that many bands are re-evaluating their aims and objectives to suit the ‘new order’, with resilience and sustainability much nearer to the top of their agendas than previously. It would, therefore, seem likely that a greater emphasis on quality, rather than on quantity, could affect the structure of many brass band events in the years ahead, but perhaps that will also assist in making the public aware of the very best that brass bands can achieve and keep our culture more relevant than the traditional stereotype played out far too often. It is hoped that here will be many more opportunities than challenges for those bands and organisations that can display dynamism. BBE’s wide and varied programme of development events and other services has something to offer all bands, regardless of their levels of ability or ambition, and we will be there to support all of them that wish to engage with us, in every way that we can, to help create a better banding experience for all of their members.”

As Orange says ‘the future looks bright!’ ■

TRUSTEE SUB-GROUPS AND REMITS

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion: Chair Julie Hoggarth.

Responsible for areas critical to meeting the criterion for ACE grant funding, the sub-group, supported by Membership Services Manager Rosie Banham, is working with sector partners to ensure that, through BBE staff training and an education programme, brass banding as a whole begins a cultural journey to reflect their diverse communities by the end of this decade, as part of BBE’s ‘Challenge 2030’ initiative, and that the composition of brass bands individually does the same.

Innovation in Education: Chair Dr. David Thornton

To ensure that every aspect of BBE’s education programme is relevant and as current as possible.

Utilisation of Digital Technology and IT Integration:

Chair Paul Beaumont

BBE invested £22,300 from round one of the Culture Recovery Fund on audio and video equipment, and now has its own in-house studio, improved website functionality, digital connectivity and utilisation. The sub-group is also identifying a new base for BBE to accommodate its rapidly expanding team, and provide exhibition, performance and resources spaces that members can use in a variety of ways.

Remuneration Working Group: Chair Mike Walsh

Responsible for developing a new and adopted Remuneration Policy to consider all BBE staff remuneration

Major Events: Chair Nigel Stevens

Charged with overseeing the 2022 European Championships at Symphony Hall, Birmingham. ■