

Bedfordshire Archives & Records Service



Annual Report 2020/21



Bedfordshire Archives & Records Service Annual Report, 2020/21

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1. Introduction

Bedfordshire Archives & Records Service began in 1913 under Bedfordshire County Council. Since 1913 it has provided a public archives service and corporate records management for semi-current files for the county council and its successors - Luton Borough Council, Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council.

The service is hosted by Bedford Borough Council but serves the other two Bedfordshire unitary authorities under service level agreements.

The service is accredited under the national archive accreditation scheme.

The global pandemic of 2020/21 caused the service to be almost totally closed to visitors. Staff worked from home for much of the time. Remote enquiries and copying orders were suspended for the first three months of the year. Some staff were redeployed to other services. This year's report does not contain financial information because it was felt that the impact of the pandemic and other changes within the service made the financial outturn of the year inappropriate for comparison to other years.



2. Staff

From April to July more than half of the archives team were redeployed to assist with Bedford Borough Council's response to the Covid-19 community hub. Those who were not redeployed continued to work on uploading catalogues and pages to our website and to monitoring and answering customer enquiries. From August most staff were able to return to working for the archives service and by the end of the year all staff had been recalled from their redeployment roles. The records management team continued their work throughout the year. Staff rose to the challenges of having to work differently and various things were learnt about archives, other services and ourselves. Although there may be scope for some home working in the future this is unlikely to be practical for most of the staff for most of their time as we need to be able to access the physical archives and records we care for and enable others to access them for their research and work.

A member of the records management team left the service in May. The vacant post was subsequently removed from the service's establishment.

Work Experience and Volunteers

Sadly, due to the pandemic and the closure of the office our volunteers were unable to help us in the usual way. Some helped remotely by continuing with transcription and indexing work, most notably our Poor Law papers on Ancestry, and by continuing to research and write pages for our website. We kept in contact with volunteers via occasional emails and it was lovely to see some at the virtual Christmas Quiz night.

Caroline Bowdler, one of our longest serving volunteers and cataloguing assistants, left the service in the autumn as she was moving out of the county. We are very thankful for all Caroline's hard work and support. Over the previous 14 years Caroline catalogued several large collections including the Inskip and Farrar architects' collections (Z1169 and Z368) and also improved the catalogue of Charter Design Architects (CDE). She also improved the cataloguing of the Whitbread letters (W1) and the Quarter Sessions Rolls (QSR) and added numerous catalogues to the online cataloguing system. A leading light in the Bedfordshire Gardens Trust Caroline also used the archives service to research historic gardens in Bedfordshire and wrote up many of her findings for their newsletter, talks and study days. We will miss Caroline but obviously wish her well in her new home.

Over the year volunteers worked on:

- Translating manor court rolls for Leighton Buzzard
- Indexing Poor Law records on Ancestry
- Providing content for our community archive webpages on Carlton, Chellington, Cranfield, Little Staughton.



3. Accommodation

Although our building has served us well for over 50 years, accommodation remains our biggest challenge and this was recognised in the key findings and required actions of the Archive Service Accreditation panel.

‘storage capacity remains an issue for the archive service, particularly for ongoing collections development and satisfactory care of all collections held at Bedfordshire Archive Service.

Required/improvement?	Requirement number(s)	Details
1 Required action	1.4	Continue seeking solutions - short term, medium term and long term - to increase storage capacity in PD5454 compliant accommodation.’

Access to the building was limited during the year and most staff worked from home. When we were able to return it was in alternating small teams of no more than 6 people and with strict cleaning and social distancing rules in place.



4. Collections

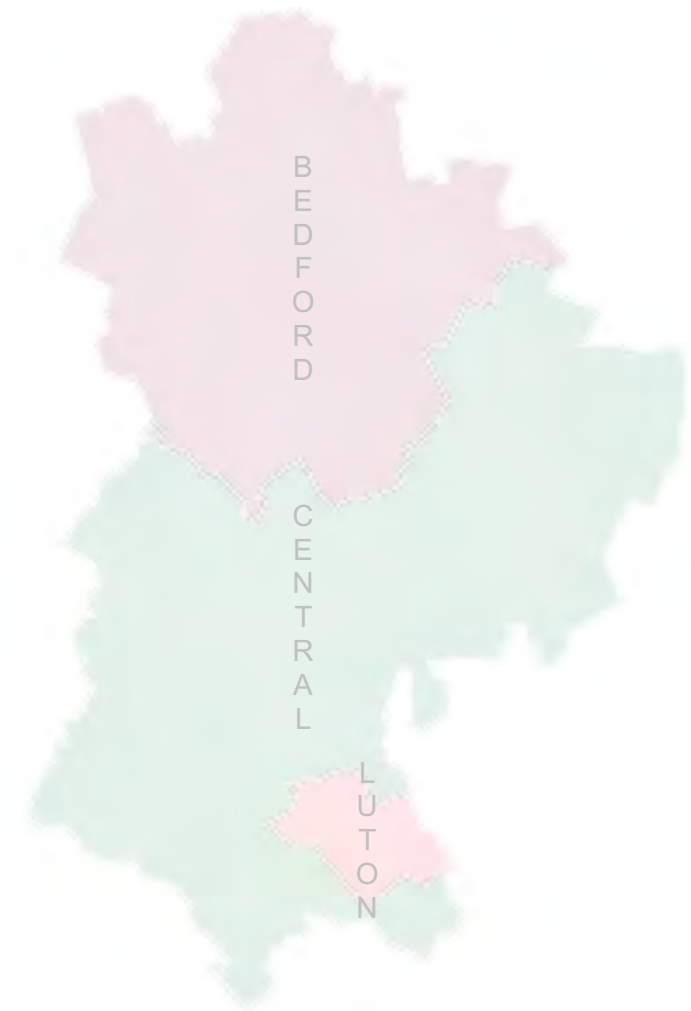
New Accessions

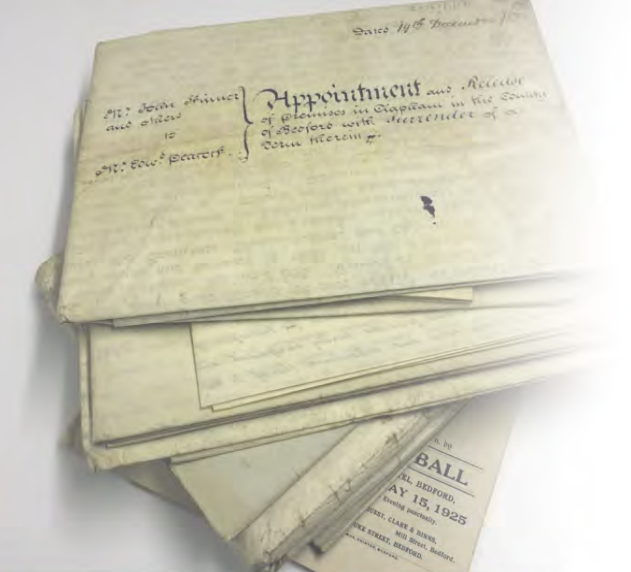
It was difficult for the service to receive new material this year however, 30 new accessions were received. These were mainly very small amounts of material received by post but also included digital photographs from the *Filling the Archives Gap* project.

Deposits included:

- Two photograph albums of the development of the Centenary Hall Kempston and the redundant church of St Mary's Bedford, (Z311/17-18)
- Deeds relating to a property in Victoria Road, Dunstable (Z1738).
- C A White, builders of Bedford (X1033)
- Deeds to cottages in Clapham (Z1741)
- Two watercolours by Thomas Fisher (Z1330/4/1-2)
- Edwardian photograph of the Bushmead Arms (Z1742)

We welcome new material that meets our collecting policy and we are particularly keen to receive material that reflects all the communities and diversity of the county and fills gaps in our collections.





Cataloguing

5,118 catalogue entries were added to the online database. 4,666 of these were for the Bedford Borough building plans 1860-1922. Before the simple catalogue entries for the plans were put onto the online catalogue, researchers had had to rely on a handwritten list in the searchroom. The process of transferring this list to the online catalogue highlighted discrepancies in the listing, which we are seeking to correct, and the need to catalogue the post 1922 plans, which currently have no finding aid.

New cataloguing included: Cyril Verdcourt's letters (Z549/17/1-188), Richardson & Houfe plans (RGH6), deeds to cottages in Clapham (Z1741), business records of C A White, builders (X1033), the Packe collection of theatre bills and programmes (Z1365).

Catalogues are published on our online public access catalogue <http://bedsarchivescat.bedford.gov.uk>

Conservation

Our conservator was redeployed to Bedford Borough's community hub from April – July.

When able to go into the office, work continued on the conservation of our will collection, condition assessments and environmental monitoring.

When unable to access the office, the conservator added conservation records to the catalogue system. The opportunity was also taken to review how the office measures up to best practice in the care it takes of the archives. This was done by using the trial version of the management tool Benchmarks 3.0 and giving feedback on this updated version of the old Benchmarks in Collection Care tool.

Good Practice		Score	
		met	partly met
5.1	Staff understand the risks to the collection of pest infestation, recognise the most harmful species and understand the need to control pests		
5.2	All storage and display areas, and storage and display furniture are cleaned and inspected regularly.		
5.3	The consumption, disposal and storage of foodstuffs are confined to areas well away from collections.		
5.4	All incoming items/collections are examined for signs of infestation, dampness or mould and affected items are quarantined		
5.5	Storage and display areas are monitored for the presence of pests. Traps are regularly checked.		
5.6	Cleaning in storage and display areas does not involve water and chemical solutions that may affect collections or promote mould and pests		
5.7	Records are kept of the locations of pest traps, the dates set, the pests trapped and action taken		
Total			

Best Practice		Score	
		met	partly met
5.8	A written cleaning specification for all storage and display areas is compiled and applied by staff or volunteers that carry out cleaning		

ancestry Home Trees Search DNA Health Help Extras

Search > Wills, Probates, Land, Tax & Criminal

Bedfordshire, England, Workhouse and Poor Law Records, 1835-1914

Search ☐ Match all terms exactly

First & Middle Name(s) Last Name

Lived In Day Month Year Location

Any Event Day Month Year Location

Keyword

Description

Residence Date Day Month Year

Bedfordshire Archives & Library

Provided in association with Bedfordshire Archives & Library

Browse this collection

To browse this collection, please select one of the options below:

Poor Law Unions

Choose...

Description

Date

Digitisation

In October Ancestry published the images of our Poor Law collections 1834-1916 and by the year end these had received 57,240 views. The indexes to accompany them will be uploaded early in 2021/22.

In early 2021 we licensed some material for digital publication. Digitisation of this material should begin in 2021/22. We also began to investigate options for the licensing of other collections.

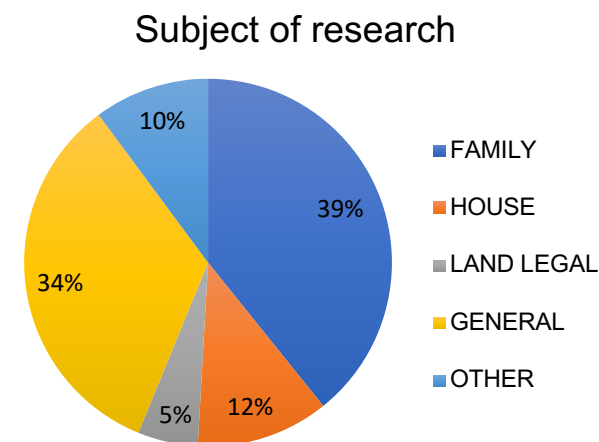
During this year our digitisation technician was redeployed from April – July. From July onward copies were provided to people who were unable to visit the office but no project digitisation was possible. While working from home the technician instigated, worked on, and coordinated the work of other staff working from home, to produce a digital index to part of the Bedfordshire Press negative collection. This will help us to unlock the potential of this rich collection of an estimated 250,000 glass plate negatives.

5. Public Access

We were only able to be open to visitors for 44 days and when open it was with strict measures in place to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The number of visits to the office was 59, the lowest number of visitors since the year 1923.

The number of documents retrieved from the stacks for visitors and enquiries was 2,157.

Staff answered 1,055 enquiries that required detailed advice or research (compared with 897 in 2019/20). 97% of remote enquiries were received by email or via our online enquiry form. We updated the online form and introduced a new form specifically for copying requests. We continue to encourage people to use our website and search our catalogue before contacting us.



We seek and listen to people's views and monitor and respond to feedback.

All our customers have been very understanding and it has been good to see how much they have appreciated the service when they have been able to visit in person or have received responses to their enquiries or copying orders.

Feedback recorded included:

- Central Bedfordshire Rights of Way department 'WOW! 😊 Many many thanks for all your help with this one, you certainly have explored all options. I am very grateful 😊 Amazing. Thanks 😊'
- Bedford Borough legal department 'Thank you again for all your assistance and hard work – I thought you might like to know the application for first registration was successful.'
- A Thank you card received after our response to an SAR 'brought back happy memories'
- Customer thanks for copies 'superb photocopying, very high quality work, having done many photocopies of documents in my time I appreciate the effort that went in to getting such a clear result.'
- Customer thanked archivist who supplied a baptism certificate to enable a couple to marry for being 'responsive, kind and incredibly helpful. It is very much appreciated and has made a huge difference to my fiancé and I.'
- Bedford Borough Council's property department thanked us for 'sifting through a sea of drawings' for an urgent request.
- An external organisation sent thanks for a report we had written for them in 2016, which this year helped them secure the resources needed for managing their archives.
- One complaint was received in relation to charges for copies.



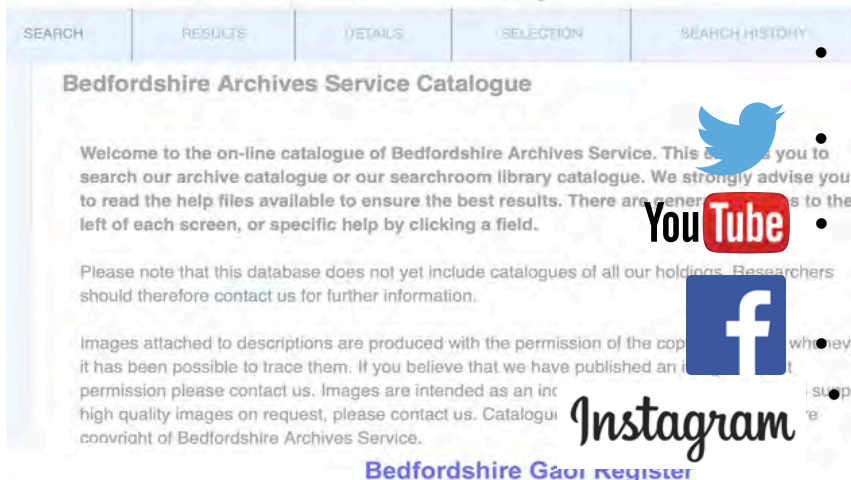
Online presence

With the office closed for most of the year our online resources were more heavily used than previously (2019/20 figure in brackets). The number of page views of our website totalled 564,762 (423,779). Our online catalogue had 352,850 (307,887) views. Our resources on *Ancestry* had 1,260,181 (916,631) views and the gaol database received 39,080 (32,465) views (30,945 via a link from Ancestry).

- On our website of general information, guides to sources, on-line newsletters, exhibitions and community histories pages, we updated guides and continued work to make the navigation easier.
- We added 174 pages to our detailed information about places in Bedfordshire. These included pages for: Carlton, Chellington, Cockayne Hatley, Langford, and Marston Moretaine. The navigation was improved and the pages were renamed and relaunched as Community Histories.
- At the end of the year 97% of our catalogues were available online via our online public access catalogue.
- Our database of 54,598 transcribed entries of the Bedford gaol registers c1760-1905 remained popular.
- Twitter @BedsArchives was used to highlight events and developments and engage with national campaigns and archive promotion such as #exploreyourarchive.
- We added new videos to our YouTube Channel BedfordshireArchives. on: the community histories pages; how to use the online catalogue; sources for researching schools; business records; and title deeds.

Facebook was also used to make our new videos available as well as for general posts.

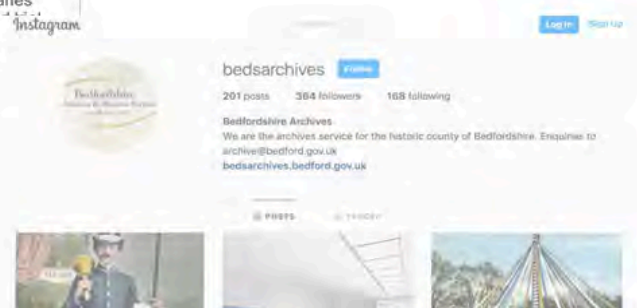
- Instagram launched in October 2020 as a way of sharing more in-depth posts than Twitter to a slightly different audience and by the end of the year had 337 subscribers.



database contains entries from gaol registers held by the Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service (BLARS). Level of detail varies between registers but each entry gives some of the following details of the criminal: name, age, hair colour, height, crime, dates of committal arrest and means of disposal e.g. release, death, transportation etc. The database presently covers the period between 1801 and 1879 (was updated on a weekly basis. Our aim is to add the details from all the surviving County Gaol and House of Correction registers held at Bedford from 1801 - 1901, an approximate total of 35,000+ entries.

to enter your search criteria. You must complete at least one field. Gaol records will be matched against the exact spelling of the criteria. Have any queries please [contact us](#).

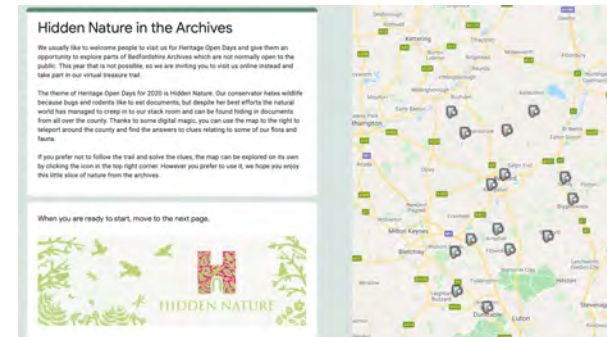
Year From:	<input type="text"/>	Year To:	<input type="text"/>
First Name:	<input type="text"/>	Last Name:	<input type="text"/>
Age (earliest):	<input type="text"/>	Age (latest):	<input type="text"/>
Gender:	<input type="text"/>	Trade or Occupation:	<input type="text"/>
Birth Town:	<input type="text"/>	Birth Country:	<input type="text"/>
Residence Town:	<input type="text"/>	Residence County:	<input type="text"/>
Offence:	<input type="text"/>	Sentence:	<input type="text"/>



Outreach

This year much of our outreach had to be virtual. Although online outreach can engage a wider audience it is not easy to judge the impact of that engagement.

- We published our quarterly newsletter and distributed it by email to our mailing list and via our website.
- We made monthly contributions to the Leighton Buzzard Observer based on our Quarter Sessions records.
- We supplied a number of our digital resource packs to schools.
- In May, archivist Kathryn Faulkner, took part in a FaceBook live event with Ancestry.com to promote the petty sessions records that we have licensed to Ancestry. The event also highlighted electoral registers and other underused material.
- In June the County Archivist contributed an article on searching the online catalogue to the Bedfordshire Family History Society's journal.
- To commemorate VJ day and for future use an interactive map of Bedfordshire during WW2 was created <http://apps.bedford.gov.uk/archives/bedsinww2.html>. This was launched with a press release and social media.
- Our contribution to Heritage Open Days in September consisted of two online activities - a Hidden Nature treasure trail that took people around a set of clues based on a map of the county and an escape room game asking people to solve clues by using the online catalogue. <https://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/ExploreYourArchive/Hidden-Nature/Hidden-Nature-in-Bedfordshire-Archives.aspx>
- In October the County Archivist gave a brief talk to the delayed AGM of the Bedfordshire Family History Society on the impact on the service of the Covid-19 restrictions and the Black Lives Matter campaign.
- To coincide with our 107th birthday on 24th October we relaunched our Community Archives webpages under the new title of Community Histories. New pages were added including introductory pages for the new parishes of Fairfield and Wixams and holding pages for the parishes not yet fully covered. We created a map with markers and rearranged the index to make it easier for people to navigate around the pages. We used social media, including our new Instagram account, to publicise the event.
- We published, via Facebook and YouTube, nine short videos made by the archivists. The first three videos introduced the Community History pages, explained the content in more detail and finally encouraged new contributors by giving an example of how to carry out research for a page; the second three explained how to get the most out of the online catalogue when searching for people, places and illustrations; the final three introduced sources for local history with videos about: Using Title Deeds for Local History; Sources for Researching Schools, and Business Records. There was engagement with the videos and feedback was good.



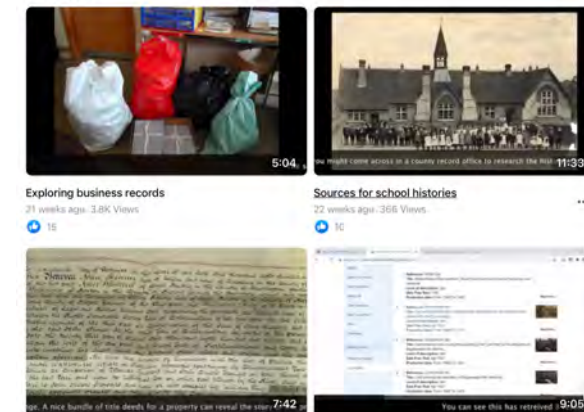
Drive Desmond the Rat out of the Stackroom



Desmond the rat has got into the stacks. You need to enlist the help of animals hidden in the archives to drive him out before he has the chance to chew any documents. Click [here](#) or on the picture above to start.



All Videos



- The 'how to use the catalogue' videos have been embedded in the search our catalogues page of our website.
- We continued to develop content for our social media including posts for the November *Explore Your Archive* campaign, an advent calendar for Instagram before Christmas and 12 Days of Christmas posts for Instagram and Twitter after Christmas.



We continued to work on, and with, projects funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund via the Greensand Country Landscape Partnership.

Our *Filling the Archives Gap* Greensand Country photo project, launched in late 2019/20, had hardly got off the ground when the country went into the first Covid-19 lockdown. We were unable to hold the third workshop or run the exhibition planned for May 2020; nor were we able to run the workshops in the autumn with a new cohort of volunteers. However, all was not lost.

One of the *Filling the Archives Gap* participants completed a project using historic images of Cranfield from our collections as the basis for modern photographs, which he will deposit with the archives service. He completed his task just before Christmas and the rector of Cranfield was so interested in the project that he created a webpage of them that links to our community history pages on Cranfield. <https://www.cranfieldchurch.org/cranfield-then-now>

In early 2021 virtual meetings were held with participants who wanted to continue to contribute to the project. As many of the participants had not been able to get out during the pandemic to take photographs, the brief was widened from photographs taken specifically for the project to photographs that the participants may already have in their collections. Although the subject matter of the photographs was not quite what we had intended this was compensated for by the increased number and date range of the images received. Cataloguing of the images and a virtual exhibition of a sample of the images will take place in May 2021.

In late 2020 we were contacted by the Greensand Country Landscape Partnership regarding another of their projects. The Stories of the Landscape project planned to engage and train volunteers to gather and develop stories for an oral history archive and as inspiration to artists. Bedfordshire Archives provided a morning of virtual training on how to use archives services. This was our first virtual workshop using Microsoft Teams. The sessions were recorded and edited videos made available to the participants as reminders of the key points after the event. Following the training sessions volunteers were able to request copies from the archives service to help with their research and we provided images for one of the proposed art works. The art works and oral histories are to be launched at the Greensand Festival in May 2021 and the completed oral histories, with transcripts provided by volunteers from The Higgins, are to be lodged with the Bedfordshire Archives service in due course.



Bedfordshire Archives Greensand Country photo project Filling the archives gap

Help create a research resource for generations to come by capturing record quality photographs of the Greensand Country. Through a series of 3 workshops you will find out what is needed and curate the project exhibition. In between workshops is the time for you to get out and about in Greensand Country capturing the images.

See overleaf for more details.



Weeding celery at Flitton, 1958 by Eric G Meadows

6. Records Management & Deeds Registry

The Records Management team work for the internal departments of the three funding authorities. They receive consignments of paper records no longer needed on a regular basis by the creating department then manage the storage, retrieval, and, when appropriate, the transfer or destruction of these internal records.

The team continued their work throughout the year and, although mainly working from home, they came into Borough Hall when necessary to retrieve and return files required by departments. New systems of getting files to customers safely had to be developed and we were thankful for the assistance given by the Borough's mail room in helping to achieve this.

Not all of our semi-current files are held on site and this year we awarded the contract for offsite storage to a new supplier following a full re-tender process.

The number of boxes received totalled 319 (compared with 1,130 in 2019/20). These came from Bedford Borough Council: 92; Central Beds Council: 9; Luton Borough Council: 141; shared services: 102. 349 boxes were securely destroyed during year.

The number of files requested back by departments totalled 354 (891); 204 relating to Bedford Borough Council holdings, 102 Central Beds Council, 36 Luton Borough Council, 8 Shared services and 4 Bedfordshire Police.

The service runs a deeds registry of title deeds, agreements, leases etc. for Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. During 2020/21 10 items were accessioned for Bedford and 438 for Central. Approximately 275 deed packets and files were requested back by departments during the year. 205 requests for copies of agreements were processed.

The team also manages the administration of Freedom of Information requests to Bedford Borough Council. 1,633 Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations requests were received by the council during the year.

7. For more information

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