

# Calcutta Connect Annual Review 2021







## Welcome

It gives us great pleasure to present you with the Calcutta Connect Annual Review for 2021. As with previous years, the aim of this document is to provide an overview across 2021 of: (i) the work Calcutta Connect has been involved in; (ii) the use to which funds, which have been so generously donated to us, have been put; and (iii) to track progress and development across all projects which we support in West Bengal.

While 2021 has been another very positive year for Calcutta Connect, it has not been without its challenges. For the second year running people across the world have been strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and our work in Calcutta has been no different. As 2021 began, the situation in India was much better than that being faced in western countries and, together with our local partner Panikhali Rural Development Society (PRDS), we were able to keep the centres we support open to older students and begin computer lessons for the very first

time. Our infrastructure development programme was also continuing with new buildings and additional classrooms being constructed in the communities where we work with PRDS.

However, by April 2021, India had come to a standstill as the country was hit by a severe wave of COVID-19 with the emergence of the Delta variant. The PRDS centres and all construction work came to a halt and would remain closed and on hold for a number of months. Like the previous year, the difficulties created by COVID-19 were compounded when a powerful cyclone struck the region where the PRDS centres are located. While not as powerful as 2020's Cyclone Amphan, Cyclone Yasi hit in late May 2021 and left a trail of destruction in its path and, in particular, heavy rainfall left villages, homes and agricultural fields inundated with rain water. During this time, we worked closely with PRDS to organise the distribution of emergency supplies of food, drinking water and temporary shelter to those most affected.

Thankfully, towards the end of the year, with COVID-19 numbers declining, we were able to resume our construction projects with PRDS and additional builders were hired to make up for lost time. Classes for our older students also resumed and a sense of normality returned to our projects as COVID-19 numbers remained low towards the end of 2021. We will work closely with PRDS in 2022 to curtail the impact of COVID-19, to the extent possible, and to ensure children's education is prioritised in both local and global crisis contexts, with a strong focus on making up for some lost time in education across all levels and class cohorts.

I would like to finish by thanking all of our supporters for their incredible support throughout 2021 and for enabling us to support the education of so many children and young people.

**Thank You,**

**Brian Kelly**

**Chief Executive Calcutta Connect**

# Calcutta Connect—Who Are We and What We Do

## About Us and Who We Are

Calcutta Connect is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2010 by past pupils of the Coláiste Éanna India Immersion Project. Our committee is made up of individuals from a broad spectrum of backgrounds who can draw upon their experience to enhance the work we do. We work towards alleviating poverty by supporting education of children and young people from some of the poorest communities in Calcutta and surrounding districts.

## Our Vision

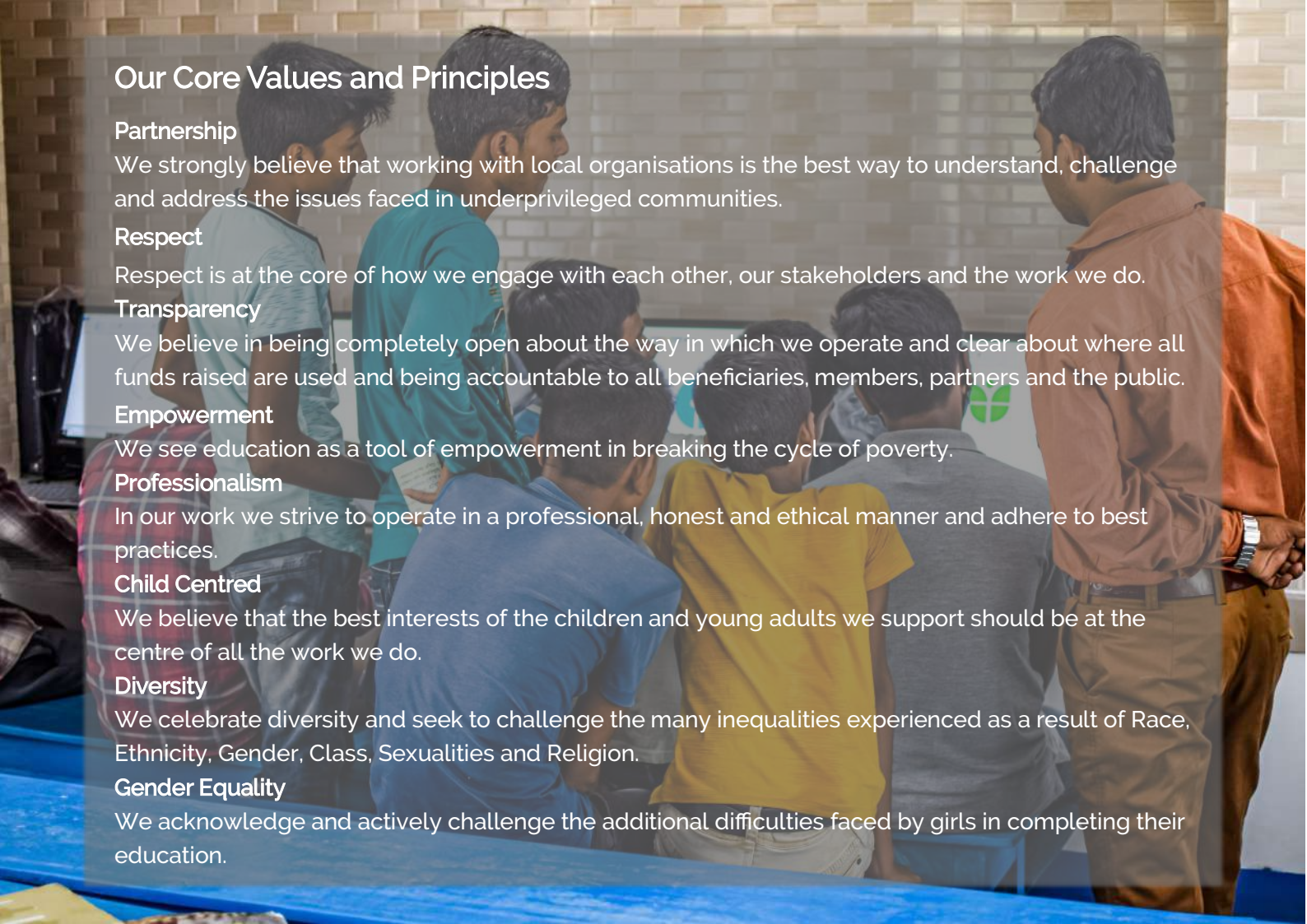
All children, young adults and families, regardless of their background, can reach their full potential through education.

## Our Mission

To work in partnership with local organisations to create sustainable change through Education, Vocational Training and Community Development, empowering children and young adults to secure a better future for themselves and their families.

## 100% Model

One of our greatest selling points to our supporters is that we operate a 100% model, meaning that 100% of all donations we receive go directly towards the projects we support in Calcutta. As we have grown as a charity we are proud to continue this 100% model as a fundamental feature of how we operate. Administrative expenses incurred (including the salary of our CEO) are met by separate funding, generously provided by a private patron. In short this means that every cent we receive in donations goes straight towards our projects in Calcutta.

A group of young people and an adult male are gathered around a screen, looking at it intently. The young people are wearing colorful t-shirts (blue, yellow, grey, and teal). The adult male is wearing a brown shirt and khaki pants. The background is a brick wall.

## Our Core Values and Principles

### **Partnership**

We strongly believe that working with local organisations is the best way to understand, challenge and address the issues faced in underprivileged communities.

### **Respect**

Respect is at the core of how we engage with each other, our stakeholders and the work we do.

### **Transparency**

We believe in being completely open about the way in which we operate and clear about where all funds raised are used and being accountable to all beneficiaries, members, partners and the public.

### **Empowerment**

We see education as a tool of empowerment in breaking the cycle of poverty.

### **Professionalism**

In our work we strive to operate in a professional, honest and ethical manner and adhere to best practices.

### **Child Centred**

We believe that the best interests of the children and young adults we support should be at the centre of all the work we do.

### **Diversity**

We celebrate diversity and seek to challenge the many inequalities experienced as a result of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class, Sexualities and Religion.

### **Gender Equality**

We acknowledge and actively challenge the additional difficulties faced by girls in completing their education.



## Committee in 2021

Following on from 2020, with the majority of our work and meetings moving online, we continued in the same vein in 2021. All of our meetings were held online during the year with regular communication between Ireland and India taking place. Our CEO Brian Kelly was able to travel to India in late 2020 and remained in India until early May 2021 working closely with our local partner PRDS. He also returned to India in October for a five week trip to view the progress that had been made and begin planning for 2022.

We continued to make progress on our compliance with the Charities Regulators Governance Code with the finalisation of policies and procedures. Being compliant with the Governance Code ensures we are operating under best practice in the charities sector.

An area we spent a considerable time on in 2021 was the safeguarding of children and adults that Calcutta Connect comes in contact with, and the finalisation of our safeguarding policy. Our safeguarding policy sets the core standards that are expected of all Calcutta Connect board members, employees and volunteers when we come into contact with any children or adults in both Ireland and India. In conjunction with this we also finalised our code of conduct for visitors to India, setting out the standards we expect of all visitors to the projects we support. The development of these policies serves to highlight the importance placed by Calcutta Connect in ensuring we set the highest possible standards when it comes to protecting the children and adults we have contact with in our work.

In December we once again held our Annual General Meeting by virtual means and we were delighted to have many of our supporters join the meeting. It was a great opportunity to give our programme and financial updates for 2021, and to present our plans for 2022.



## Our Work in 2021

In 2021 we continued our partnership with Panikhali Rural Development Service (PRDS) for a fifth year. Student numbers increased in our three centres (located at Panikhali, Alor Disha and Boria) to 920, with students of all ages attending throughout the day. The centres we support with PRDS are located in rural villages approximately 60km south of Kolkata. They are essential in providing children, young adults and their families with education and programmes that benefit their communities in these marginalised areas.

Our infrastructure development programme with PRDS continued throughout 2021, following on from the great progress that has been made since it began in late 2019. This year the main areas of work were in the construction of a new centre in Boria, additional classrooms in Alor Disha and a new skills training and medical centre in Panikhali Village.

An essential part of our work since 2010 has been our support of students in their final years of secondary education, and continued support for those who have progressed to college. This year we provided 170 sponsorships to students from marginalised communities to assist them in completing their education, board examinations and progression to college.

## Panikhali Rural Development Society

2021 was the fifth year of our partnership with our local partner organisation Panikhali Rural Development Society (PRDS). We work with PRDS in three rural communities approximately 60km south of Kolkata, the centres where we work together are known as Panikhali, Boria and, Alor Disha. In 2021 there were 920 students of all ages enrolled in the three PRDS centres.

Our main programme with PRDS is focused on supporting the education of children and young people in the three communities. For the younger students aged 4-6 classes take place each day and are taught the basics of Bengali, English and, Maths to prepare them for entry to Government run schools in their locality. During their time in pre-school each child receives books, a uniform and a nutritious meal at the end of each day's lessons. After completion of our pre-school students are mainstreamed into local government schools in the areas. However, their involvement with our centres does not end at this point. Instead they enter what is our biggest programme in the form of follow up coaching for Classes I-XII (ages 6-18). With many of our students being first generation learners, providing them with additional support in our centres is essential in enabling them to keep up to speed in school, tracking their progress and pass exams.

In addition to the education programme, mother's groups have been formed by PRDS with the purpose of discussing issues faced by women, their children and to create awareness on overcoming these issues. Vocational Training takes place in each community to teach mothers and early school leavers to be trained in tailoring and clothes making and learn a skill that will enable them to make an income for themselves and their families. The Vocational Training Programme will be expanded further in 2022 to new areas with the opening of the Skills, Training and Medical Centre in Panikhali.

We are lucky to work with a great team in PRDS that consists of 52 staff and management who work tirelessly in the various programmes to benefit children, young people, mothers and, families in the three communities.









## Student Sponsorships

One of the central objectives under which Calcutta Connect operates is to support older students in completing second level education and progressing to third level (i.e. attending colleges or training institutions). Once again we supported students from marginalised backgrounds who would otherwise be unable to complete their education, due to costs involved with admission fees, books and private tuitions.

In 2021 our student sponsorship programme assisted 170 students in Classes 9-12 (age 14- 18) and 30 students attending colleges and training institutions in Kolkata.

In a clear indication of the positive impact of our sponsorship programme, 2021 saw some of the first students we supported in 2010 complete their college education and progress to Masters Level studies and / or secure job placements. Seeing these students progress to such a high level in their education reminds us of the reason Calcutta Connect was established in the first place. We are tremendously proud of what these students have accomplished in reaching their potential.

## 2021 Look Back — Computer Classes

One of the programmes we have always been keen to introduce with PRDS is computer lessons, given the value computer literacy provides to individuals today. The redevelopment of old centres and construction of new centres has now enabled this. In late 2020 we assisted PRDS in acquiring 24 desktop computers and hiring a computer training teacher, with classes commencing in January 2021.

The classes began in the Panikhali and Alor Disha centres initially, with lessons starting in the Boria centre later in the year when construction was completed there. Students are trained in a variety of IT aspects including computer hardware and various software packages such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, Powerpoint etc.).

The classes initially began for older students, many of whom had never before had access to computers or any form of training. Classes take place twice a week and it is planned to expand classes to include younger students in 2022.





## COVID-19 in 2021

Low case numbers in India in early 2021 placed us in a strong position to resume classes on a regular schedule. However, by the middle of March cases began to rise, rapidly reaching record levels by the end of April. The West Bengal Government issued an order for all schools to close in early April. The PRDS centres followed suit and remained closed for six months. With the strict rules in place and travel links curtailed, our infrastructure development programme with PRDS was put on hold for a number of months.

Due to state elections taking place in April, the West Bengal government delayed imposing a full lockdown until May. In a similar fashion to the lockdown of 2020, this lockdown was particularly harsh on families that rely on a daily wage earner as their sole means of income. Income is primarily found through construction work or through employment as domestic servants. In the majority of cases, the families of PRDS students earn a living this way, and due to the restrictions many lost their ability to earn money, whilst getting little support from the local authorities.



From our experience in 2020 we were aware of the vast difficulties the lockdown would cause to the communities where we work and to our student's families in particular. We liaised closely with our local manager Baren Mondal and once again we arranged the distribution of essential food items to the families in the three PRDS communities.

Much of the learning in India reverted to online means which was not possible for the majority of students in our PRDS centres, as the availability of smart devices, reliable data connections and in some cases electricity, does not exist in these areas. In an effort to combat this, the PRDS staff have played an incredible role in preparing worksheets for all students, safely distributing the worksheets to students' homes and



arranging collection and feedback to be provided each week. With our centres closed for long periods, this became a vital link in order to keep our students in the routine of learning and completing school work throughout this difficult period. The continued support provided by teachers also served to mitigate the risk of increased school dropout rates due to the pandemic.

# Cyclone Yaas

After the devastation that was caused in 2020 by Cyclone Amphan, 2021 saw another powerful cyclone hit the region where we work with PRDS. In late May, Cyclon Yaas struck and although it was less powerful than Cyclone Amphan, it did bring enormous amounts of rainfall that coincided with high tide and resulted in rivers bursting their banks and mass flooding in the region.

Our newly constructed centres were again used by local communities to shelter for the duration of the cyclone, providing. This use of our centres will be of great importance going forward as cyclones are increasing in their regularity and intensity in the area.



After the cyclone had subsided and PRDS staff had an opportunity to assess the impact on local communities, we quickly worked with PRDS to put together a relief programme aimed at helping those most affected by the storm. On two occasions in June, PRDS management and staff travelled by boat to deliver much needed supplies to villages that had borne the brunt of the flooding. Each family was given supplies of food, clean drinking water and tarpaulins that could be used for shelter until their homes were repaired.



## Exam Results

Once again this year we were delighted to see large numbers of students from our sponsorship programme reach the latter stages of their secondary education and appear for their board examinations. Exams were due to take place in May but due to the severity of the outbreak of COVID-19 at the time they were cancelled.

With board examinations unable to proceed due to the pandemic, grades were calculated based on each student's performance in previous exams and internal assessments. Results which are normally released by the early summer were delayed until August and we were extremely pleased to learn that all our students had passed their exams.

These students will now progress to the final two years of their secondary education or to further studies in training institutes and colleges. We would like to wish all the students the very best for the future and we look forward to working with them in the next part of their education.



## Imran in Ireland and Germany

As one of our first student sponsorships, we have been supporting Imran in his education since 2011. After many years of hard work in school, college and work experience we were incredibly proud when Imran was awarded a scholarship in Germany to undertake a Masters Degree in Filmmaking and Directing. After months of uncertainty due to travel restrictions and embassy closures for visa applications, Imran finally gained clearance to travel in August of 2021.

We are incredibly thankful to the Irish Embassy in New Delhi who facilitated Imran in obtaining an Irish visa to allow him to visit Dublin prior to his course beginning in Germany. Imran spent four weeks in Ireland during August and September and it gave him an opportunity to meet with our board members and many supporters of Calcutta Connect.

This was Imran's first time leaving India and it was great for him to be able to travel throughout Ireland during his stay. Towards the end of his stay in Ireland, Imran visited Ballyroan Boys School to meet with a number of classes to speak about his life in India and to tell his inspirational story of how access to education has changed his life. With our close ties to Coláiste Éanna, it was fantastic for Imran to visit the school and meet many of the staff members and pupils he had previously met in Kolkata during the school's immersion trips.

With his course beginning in early October, Imran departed Ireland for Germany in early September to prepare for the beginning of his Masters in Berlin. After securing student accommodation, opening a bank account and completing local registrations, he began his course in the first week of October. We've been delighted to regularly hear of Imran's progress and to see that he has settled in very well to his course and life in Germany.









## Blood Donation Camps

With the redevelopment of our centres, we have been delighted to see the centres used for a multitude of purposes, beyond their primary function of classrooms, to the benefit of the local communities as a whole. One example of this has arisen during the times of cyclones, where, in addition to providing shelter to large numbers of people in the local community, PRDS organised a blood donation camp in the Panikhali centres in conjunction with a local hospital.

Staff and management of PRDS along with members of the local community came to the centre to donate blood during a day-long drive. Blood stocks had become particularly low in government run hospitals during the second wave of COVID-19 and this community led effort provided relief to stocks at this critical time. In total 150 people donated, with the blood sent to a nearby government hospital to be used for patients in need. All those who donated blood received refreshments and a small gift from PRDS as a token of their appreciation





## 2021 in Pictures



Inauguration of Boria Centre



Student Sponsorships in Panikhal



Tailoring Training in Boria



Computer Training Class



Construction of Boria Centre



Republic Day Celebrations

## School Building Programme—Recap

With the number of students steadily growing in the three communities where we work with PRDS, we knew we would need to significantly redevelop and expand these centres. We began in Panikhali where the existing school had a bamboo frame and straw roof, and constructed an entirely new building that was completed in 2020. The new building consists of four classrooms, toilets, an office, a kitchen, a library, a visitors room, computer room, a vocational training room and a community meeting hall.

The next big project was the expansion of the Alor Disha centre where we had been working with PRDS since 2018. The original building consisted of two rooms and with the numbers of students on the rise we knew we would have to significantly increase the capacity of the building to cater for the growing numbers. In late 2019 we constructed an additional level to the existing building to cater for the growing numbers, and in 2020 we acquired land to the rear of the building that would allow extra classrooms to be constructed.



## Panikhali Medical and Skills Training Centre

With our programmes with PRDS primarily focusing on supporting children and young people in their education, it has been a long held desire of ours and PRDS to identify more areas of need in the communities where we work. One such area is that of skills development for young adults, providing the opportunity to learn a lifelong skill which can be used to earn an income, start their own small business or gain employment.

In early 2021 we assisted PRDS in purchasing a plot of land to construct a skills and training centre in Panikhali Village, close to our main centre. The purpose of the centre is to provide a hub for young people to learn skills such as electrical work, computer hardware repairs, beauty therapy and other areas that are identified by the local team as being directly linked to gainful employment. A medical room will also be included in this building where visiting doctors specialising in various practices will come to assess the local community.

Work began on the new building in March 2021 but quickly came to a halt due to the lockdown imposed during the second wave of COVID-19. Construction work resumed in November 2021 and has continued at a good pace since then. The building will consist of four training rooms and a medical room. The building is scheduled to be completed by the summer of 2022 and we hope to begin some of the first training courses in the third quarter of the year.







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## Get Involved With Calcutta Connect

If you are passionate about helping support the education of young people from marginalised communities in India we want to hear from you. There are many ways to get involved in the work we do from making a one-off or regular donation, to attending one of our fundraisers (or organising your own), to becoming a corporate sponsor or visiting Calcutta with us. We are always open to new ideas and working with new people so please do get in touch if you have any suggestions as to how you might be able to help.

### Donate

We are always grateful for any single donation and we also have a large number of ongoing supporters. 100% of all donations we receive go directly to the projects we support. Visit our donations page on our website to see the various ways we accept donations and make a difference

### Organise a Fundraiser

A fundraising event is a great way to raise funds and help spread the word about the work we do in Calcutta Connect. No matter how big or small your planned event is we want to hear from you and will support you in the planning of your event.





## Corporate Partnership

If you are looking to partner your company with a charity where you can be assured that all of the funds you donate go directly to education projects in India then look no further. We have been lucky to engage with a number of corporates in recent years and are always looking to expand our circle of supporters. Through partnering with Calcutta Connect you will help provide education to some of the poorest communities in Calcutta, while at the same time meeting your own Corporate Social Responsibility objectives. We can attend your offices and present on our work and we have previously arranged visits to our programmes in Calcutta for some corporate supporters. We are happy to work with you to design a programme that would fit best with your company so please get in touch.

## School Visits

Our committee members are always available to undertake school visits or speak to other community groups to inform students and all our supporters of the work we do, the projects we support and more generally about development issues faced in India. We can tailor a session depending on the age groups of any students involved and the topics that teachers or group leaders may wish to explore. Please contact us any time to arrange a talk.





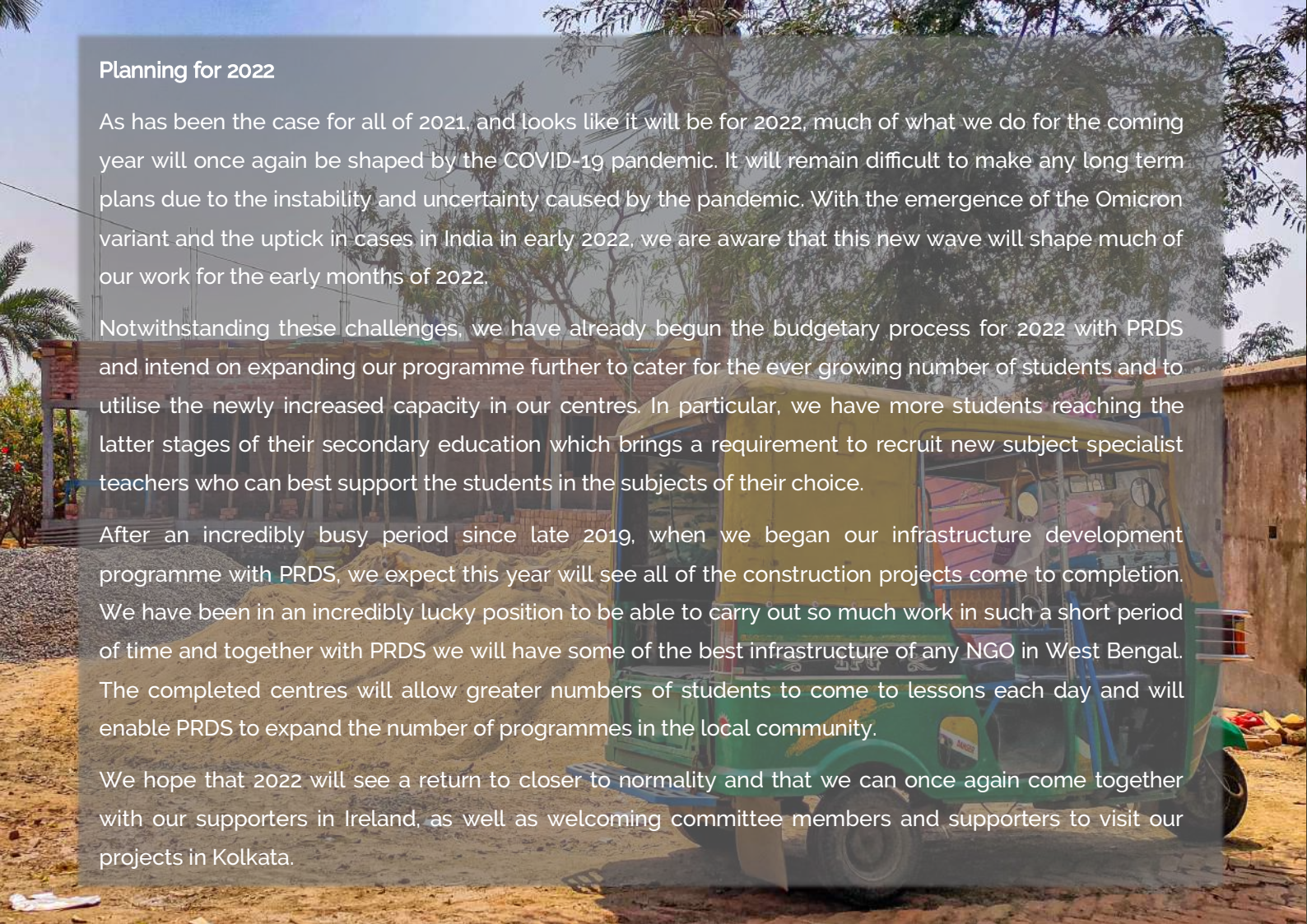
## Planning for 2022

As has been the case for all of 2021, and looks like it will be for 2022, much of what we do for the coming year will once again be shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. It will remain difficult to make any long term plans due to the instability and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. With the emergence of the Omicron variant and the uptick in cases in India in early 2022, we are aware that this new wave will shape much of our work for the early months of 2022.

Notwithstanding these challenges, we have already begun the budgetary process for 2022 with PRDS and intend on expanding our programme further to cater for the ever growing number of students and to utilise the newly increased capacity in our centres. In particular, we have more students reaching the latter stages of their secondary education which brings a requirement to recruit new subject specialist teachers who can best support the students in the subjects of their choice.

After an incredibly busy period since late 2019, when we began our infrastructure development programme with PRDS, we expect this year will see all of the construction projects completion. We have been in an incredibly lucky position to be able to carry out so much work in such a short period of time and together with PRDS we will have some of the best infrastructure of any NGO in West Bengal. The completed centres will allow greater numbers of students to come to lessons each day and will enable PRDS to expand the number of programmes in the local community.

We hope that 2022 will see a return to closer to normality and that we can once again come together with our supporters in Ireland, as well as welcoming committee members and supporters to visit our projects in Kolkata.











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