


It's all about being community-led

ANNUAL REVIEW 2023-24



CHAIRPERSON'S
STATEMENT



SOCIAL ACTION
AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNITY
HALLS



COLLABORATIVE
HOUSING



PLANNING AND
STEWARDSHIP



FINANCIAL
STATEMENT

CHAIR STATEMENT



I have been reflecting on my time as a trustee of Community First since I shall be retiring from the Board at this year's AGM. I was first elected in 2007 although I had already come to know the organisation through its assistance with a new village hall project in Lewknor. The support we had then was outstanding and it has been so inspiring to see, over the years, that the quality of the work we do with local communities has remained consistently excellent and effective.

Times have changed very significantly for charities since 2007. They now need to be much more flexible and adaptable and able to maximise opportunities as they arise. Community First is very successful at developing new areas of work, including a consultancy to support spatial planning and citizen-led management of local assets. The skills and experience of our joint CEOs and staff have also enabled the organisation to expand into areas of work, including health, nature, and climate change.

In 2023, new activity has included the Well Together community-based health programme and the Rural Housing Enabler project. However, Community

First's core purpose has not changed. It remains an organisation which enables communities to develop their own skills and supports them to achieve the things they need.

This year, the organization embarked on a strategy and branding review – the outlook for charities remains challenging and this review will help ensure that we retain and deepen our relationships with all our partners and stakeholders and continue to ensure our effectiveness as a community infrastructure support organisation.

We currently have a strong Board of Trustees and are very pleased to have been able to recruit two new trustees during the year. Linda Horgan is very experienced in international community development and has been the director of a charity based in Cambodia. Emily Urquhart is a policy officer at Oxfordshire County Council and is working with deprived communities within the county. I have every confidence that the Board will remain effective in contributing to Community First's success and will continue its constructive role as a critical friend to Emily and Tom. I leave this excellent and very special organisation in very good hands.

Gill Bindoff, Chair

Social Action

Support continued for the development of Community-led Plans, culminating in two successful community surveys and reports with recommendations for future action in villages in the South and West of Oxfordshire. Other town and parish councils also received information about CLP's, support for fundraising, and working with community groups.

Connected Communities Fund

Another busy year saw the launch of a second round of the Connected Communities Fund, run by Community First and Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council. 62 groups across the county were funded from the £175,000 pot.

All projects supported older people and those with additional needs to build social connections, ranging from over 60's clubs and community cafes to singing for dementia groups and projects providing food or exercise.



Key Facts

<div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; padding: 10px; font-size: 24px; font-weight: bold;">60+</div> 	<div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; padding: 10px; font-size: 24px; font-weight: bold;">8</div> 	<div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; padding: 10px; font-size: 24px; font-weight: bold;">6</div> 
<p>Community groups and organisations funded by the Connected Communities Fund</p>	<p>Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) Peer Support Network sessions</p>	<p>Communities supported with community-led plans and other local initiatives</p>

2 On-line training courses organised with the Disclosure and Barring Service

2 Research reports delivered on health and wellbeing

1 Commission to manage the Caldecott Health and Wellbeing Grant Fund



Marston Community Kitchen

Health and Wellbeing

Community First was commissioned by the County Council to work with the Caldecott Health and Wellbeing Partnership to manage a grant fund. Ten groups were funded to carry out all sorts of activities for residents, such as wellbeing sessions for primary school pupils, a walking group for older people, and community arts.

We undertook further health and wellbeing research in Littlemore for the City and County Councils and in four villages near Bicester for Healthwatch Oxfordshire. One-to-one conversations, surveys, focus groups, and desk research were used to understand access to services, local assets and challenges impacting health and wellbeing. The final reports also included recommendations for how to support communities to help themselves or engage outside agencies to improve health and wellbeing for residents.

The Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) Peer Support Network was also very active, meeting many times throughout the year to share learning and discuss key issues which emerge when working in communities.



Charlbury Community Workshop – CCF



Cropredy short mat bowls club – funded via the Connected Communities Fund

Well Together Programme

The Well Together (WT) Programme – delivered by Community First in partnership with OCVA – is an innovative grants programme funded by the NHS Integrated Care Board. WT recognises the essential role community and voluntary organisations play in addressing health inequalities at a local level. The programme provides funding for new and existing groups and organisations running activities in ten priority wards across Oxfordshire. It also includes capacity-building support for funded groups.

Since launching the programme, we have been immensely encouraged by the level of engagement from community groups and organisations. As well as supporting with immediate health and wellbeing needs, the programme aims for the activities to address

the root causes of preventable health conditions, enabling healthy independent living for longer, whilst helping to build more connected communities.



Key Facts

200+



Residents attending drop-ins

7



Well Together community sessions



What people said: Well Together Programme

“Can I just say that you and the team are doing a great job in your efforts to reach lots of groups. It is also very valuable having you and the team on hand for support and to answer questions.”

“Thank you for all your efforts making the process in applying so easy. But what I loved about the process is the community feel and engagement. Firstly, holding meetings in community venues and providing such lovely spaces for us to network. Because of this I am now planning on working with [others] to support each other and therefore the wider community.”

Woodstock Community Development Project

Spring 2024 saw the culmination three-year Woodstock Community Development Project. There are always mixed feelings when a project comes to an end, but the underlying mission of on-the-ground community development support is to hand over to the community to take activity forward.

The overall project aim was to work with residents to support and further develop a vibrant and self-sustaining community. This wasn't without its challenges, not the least of which was launching when the world was still emerging from the pandemic... The first months were all about introductions and putting down roots, which led to conversations and ideas in relation to key challenges and opportunities. These crystallised around support for residents at the new Park View development (to help build bridges with the existing community), the need to support volunteering and local organisations

(most of which have common challenges such as funding and resourcing), and the need to improve communication between groups and avoid duplication of effort.

This translated into a huge amount of work: multiple meetings, holding or supporting events, the development of shared resources, offering small amounts of funding for community groups, connecting groups and individuals... Crucially, it also meant identifying and supporting key community volunteers who could take things forward when the project ended. This was successfully done, notably in relation to the creation of a Park View Resident's Forum and a new town-wide Cultural Forum, which will bring volunteers and organisations together regularly to explore new initiatives and manage shared challenges.

Read the Woodstock end of project report



What people said: Woodstock Community Development project

"You have been a pleasure to have around, always made yourself available ... a sounding board for our ideas and offering good ideas and advice on our community activities. You are an experienced, listening ear and that has been welcomed."

Hilary Brown, Sustainable Woodstock

Heyford Park community development project

Community First's on the ground community development worker – Rosie – continues to support various projects and initiatives. The Community Hub (part of the Warm Space network) which Rosie started as a coffee and craft group, has become resident-run and added news sessions, while the Tai Chi class has moved venue due to popular demand. The Hub is in excellent hands, with a dynamic, forward-thinking committee.

Elsewhere, the Heyford Maker's Shed was delighted to be handed a builder's compound of three Portakabins, toilets, a kitchen, and massive exterior space thanks to Rosie's negotiations with the developers. They can now meet several times a week and respond to requests from the community. This has included working closely with a Public Art project to complete swift boxes designed by local school children, which will be installed on local residents' homes. In addition, Rosie successfully progressed a new Wayfinding Route, negotiating with Cherwell District Council to secure Public Art funding alongside S106 developer contribution monies – the route itself is due to open in autumn 2024.



Heyford Park Event

Community Shops

These shops continue to play a vital role in communities, supporting volunteering and social cohesion. Encouragingly, there is some evidence to suggest that use of community shops is trending up again, after a post-pandemic trend of people returning to the big supermarkets to do their shopping. Community First has been pleased to find that community shops in Brightwell, Wootton, and Islip are doing very well. However, shops in other places are reporting lower sales.

Costly energy bills continue to be a problem and although shops seem to be weathering this increase it is putting a strain on profits. Some are concerned about long-term viability if costs continue to increase. For Little Milton community shop and Post Office, energy prices have tripled, resulting in them taking measures to cut down on energy use. Luckily, their cafe and the Post Office are busy.

Delivery problems remain challenging across the board. Bookers have increased their minimum order size, causing some shops to have storage problems – one solution has been for different shops to share an order. They are also charging for click and collect, a cost that mounts up over the year. Together with the cost of petrol staying high, some smaller shops feel they are being penalised.



Radley Village Shop



Community First's Tessa Hall at the OCVA Volunteer Fair

Community Transport

With each and every year, we see Oxfordshire's community transport sector getting a little bit stronger and resilient despite all the many challenges. We still have over 85 car and minibus schemes offering specific transport services for the communities they serve.

All of these schemes rely on volunteers who give up a lot of their time to run these 'lifeline' transport schemes. Much like public transport services, they do need investing in both financially (particularly the minibus schemes) and by volunteering to support the scheme or by using the services they provide.

It is very pleasing to see both the County Council and The National Lottery proactively supporting these schemes with funding – over 20 schemes received funding as well as a few schemes which received funding from the Homes for Ukrainian funds (administered by Community First on behalf of the County Council). Onwards and upwards!



Our Bus Bartons – a day out for Ukrainian refugees

Another busy year

Community First's community halls support service remained extremely busy this year. Our adviser fielded hundreds of enquiries on a huge range of subjects. The big news for several was securing funding for improvements via the Platinum Jubilee grant fund, which Community First administered locally on behalf of Action with Communities in Rural England: Longworth Village Hall, Shrevenham Memorial Hall, and Littleworth Reading Room were all successful.

As with last year, halls are struggling with high energy prices. Many have suffered a huge increase in costs, especially when energy contracts have ended. Insulation and energy efficiency projects are multiplying, with increased requests for information about solar panels, storage batteries, and energy audits. Although rental charges have had to increase in many cases, a survey has shown that these are still very reasonable – committees are working hard to keep venues affordable for their community.

Hall committees remain very supportive of each other – there is much enthusiastic discussion of shared challenges and opportunities across the network. Community First ran a series of local area meetings this year, with 78 committee members attending from 54 different halls. Village Halls Week remains an important part of the calendar, raising the community profile of halls and often attracting new trustees and committee members, which is crucial for longer-term sustainability.

Key Facts

201



Community Hall members of
CFO's Advice Service



Longworth village hall - improvements



ACRE Village Halls Advisers Conference



Village Halls Week 2024



Working closely with the community



In 2023, Community First launched a new rural housing enabling service. This is part of a national initiative, funded via Defra via Action with Communities in Rural England.

In Oxfordshire's rural communities, the market for housing has become divorced from local people and their incomes and a lack of affordable homes threatens the social fabric of rural life. The enabling service supports communities who want to deliver affordable housing for their residents, working to identify local housing need, find a suitable site, get a planning permission, and build the homes. We have undertaken several housing needs surveys this year and are now working with parish councils and housing associations on next steps. It has been many years since Community First was able to deliver this service and we are delighted to be able, once again, to support communities to meet their local needs.

Community First also has ongoing funding from all of Oxfordshire's councils for our more general, community-led housing service. This supports communities in towns and villages to bring forward homes, for example via the establishment of a Community Land Trust, Cohousing group or Housing Co-Operative. We are working with 9 such groups across Oxfordshire.

Even small-scale housing projects take a long time to complete and we are delighted that in 2024 - after 6 years of hard work - Hook Norton Community Land Trust completed their project of 12 low carbon homes for local people, plus a communal growing space and a community building. The scheme demonstrates that when the community is in charge it can deliver much more than houses.

Key Facts

9



Community-led housing projects supported

4



Housing Needs Surveys undertaken



Hook Norton – Bourne Green

Photo Credit: Greencore Homes

Placemaking in action

Following this year’s launch of our new community-led stewardship support service, 2023 also saw our first significant commission. Cherwell District Council brought in Community First to undertake an options appraisal for how best to set up and maintain a viable community management organisation for the nationally significant NW Bicester Eco-Town Development.

We also undertook a study for Wallingford Town Council, assessing the possibilities for the council taking on assets coming forward from new developments. Interest continues to rise from communities, Local Authorities, and others in long-term, community-led stewardship, which we think can be the most genuine and inspiring form of placemaking out there.

Elsewhere, our neighbourhood planning consultancy remains very busy, and we continue to support a range of plans, both new and reviews of existing ones. We also continue to refine our methodology on local Design Codes. Several plans are now approaching submission, the culmination of much hard work from volunteers.

We have also developed a closer relationship with the **Oxfordshire Neighbourhood Plans Alliance** – years of collective effort on neighbourhood plans means there is an impressive network of highly knowledgeable NP practitioners across the County. The system is flawed and the planning sands sand ever shifting, whether it be Local Authority plans being updated or changes at national level. It can be a frustrating world to navigate but Community First is committed to supporting communities to make the planning system best work for them. We want to help push the envelope as far as possible in achieving policies and projects that respond creatively and ambitiously to key issues such as housing, nature and biodiversity, and climate.

Key Facts

6



Neighbourhood Plans supported

2



2 Stewardship Commissions completed

1 Transport Needs Survey completed

What people said: Stewardship support

“CFO are instrumental in supporting Eynsham achieve its long-term stewardship aims (and Neighbourhood Plan refresh). The professional experience and in-depth knowledge demonstrated by Tom and Stephen on this vast and potentially complicated subject continues to be highly valued and their support is immensely appreciated. CFO’s recent Stewardship event evidenced the challenges faced by communities, organisations, and local authorities and lead the way in finding sustainable solutions.”
Eynsham Parish Council



Financial statement

	2023-24	2022-23
Project Grants and Contracts	£415k	£310k
Other Income	£34k	£47k
Interest/Investment Income	£13k	£9k
TOTAL INCOME	£462k	£366k
EXPENDITURE	£419k	£359k

OUR STAFF & TRUSTEES

Staff

Tom McCulloch

Joint Chief Executive Officer

Emily Lewis-Edwards

Joint Chief Executive Officer

Fiona Brown

Collaborative Housing Lead

Tessa Hall

Community Buildings and Retail Advisor

Stephen McKenna

Community Planning Officer

Rosie Phillips

Community Development Worker

Kay Sentance

Community Development Worker

Lisa Stead

Community Development Programme Officer

Rachel Woods

Community Capacity Builder

Jane Gallagher

Community Capacity Builder

Assia Bibi

Community Capacity Builder

Dolcie Obhiozele

Community Capacity Builder

Gemma Tindsley

Senior Administrator

Lorna Mills

Community Oil Buying Coordinator

Trustees

Chair

Gill Bindoff

President

Jonathan Reuid

Vice-Chair

Jackie Wilderspin

Treasurer

Malcolm Taylor

Jon Bright

Bev Hindle

Christopher Kenneford



CONTACTS

Community First Oxfordshire

South Stables
Worton Rectory Farm
Worton, Witney
OX29 4SU

T: 01865 883488

E: info@communityfirstoxon.org

www.communityfirstoxon.org

 [facebook.com/
communityfirstoxon](https://facebook.com/communityfirstoxon)

 [@oxcommunitybuzz](https://twitter.com/oxcommunitybuzz)

Community First Oxfordshire is a Company limited by guarantee (No. 2461552) and a Charity (No. 900560)

OUR PARTNERS & STAKEHOLDERS

